Perspectives on return migration: A multi-sited, longitudinal study on the return processes of Armenian and Georgian migrants

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General introduction

1.1 Return migration

Within migration studies, migration was long considered as one-way process, as a process with a starting point (country of origin) and an ending point (country of destination). Consequently, migration research mainly focused onto push or pull factors that induced migrants' departure from the country of origin, and their integration processes in the destination country (Jeffery & Murison, 2011; Olwig, 2007), which resulted in little interest in the topic of return migration, particularly in the case of voluntary migration flows (Arowolo, 2000; King, 2000; Sinatti, 2011; Tannenbaum, 2007). Yet, since the 1980s, scientific debates on the phenomenon of return migration, the process of returning to the country of origin after residing a certain period abroad, have started (Cassarino, 2004), further the rise in forced displacement and asylum application in the 1990s, and the from then on growing politicization of international migration movements intensified the academic interest and research in the topic (Black & Koser, 1999; Cassarino, 2008; Chimni, 2004; Jeffery & Murison, 2011; Noll, 1999).

In the following sections, we first explore this policy context and recent developments in policy discourses on return migration. Secondly, we take a closer look to the content of assisted voluntary return (AVR) support and its implementation in the European and Belgian context. Next, we outline how the topic of return migration is addressed in the existing bodies of migration studies, and give an overview of the research on migrants' return decision processes and post-return experiences. We then explain how this literature review leads to the problem statement, research questions and aims of this study. Finally, the research methodology and the research design of the five studies of this research are described.

1.2 Policy context and policy discourses on return migration

The return of migrants from the European host country back to their country of origin has become a high priority on the agenda of European migration policies (Black & Gent, 2006; Cassarino, 2008; Van Houte & De Koning, 2008), and recent migration developments in Europe make it likely that this focus on return will not decrease in the upcoming years (Åkesson & Baaz, 2015). Various academic researchers have indicated the powerful impact of policy, policy discourses and national boundaries on migration, and, therefore, have expressed the critical requisite to include the political context and the role of states into research when addressing and trying to understand the topic of return migration (Cassarino, 2008; Castles, 2010; De Genova, 2002; Long & Oxfeld, 2004; Munck, 2008;

Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002; Zolberg, 1989). The intensified attention of governments for the processes of return migration has gradually lead to different perceptions of migration in general, and of return in particular (Black & Gent, 2006; Cassarino, 2008). Yet, the current state-centered perspective of West-European receiving countries does not look at return migration as a stage in the migration cycle, but defines it very narrowly as "the act of leaving the territory of the destination country" (Cassarino, 2014, p. 9). Though this has not always been the case. In what follows, we illustrate how broader societal changes, such as economic recession, growing xenophobic attitudes and rising numbers of asylum applications, led to evolution in migration policy, and consequently also to changed meanings and connotations attached to return migration and return policy.

1.2.1 'Discovering return migration'

In the beginning of the 20th century, there was very little government interference or restriction with regard to migration in general (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). People freely moved to a different state were work was available and returned home when times became bad. The first emphasis on return migration emerged in the 1970s. The return component was not entirely new in migration policy – it had already been part of the labour recruitment measures of most governments in the 1950s and 1960s (Schneider & Kreienbrink, 2010), though there was little need to enforce the return of foreign workers who preferred to stay in periods of economic growth and a high need for labourers. Influenced by the economic recession and the decreasing need for extra labour in the mid-1970s (Brücker *et al*., 2002), the further expansion of nation states' sovereignty (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002) and growing xenophobic attitudes (Collinson, 1993; Entzinger, 1985; Hammar, 1989), governments started to perceive and approach migration as a 'social problem', associating it in particular with illegality and abuse of the welfare system, and thus as a phenomenon that needed to be controlled and regulated (Commers & Blommaert, 2001; Kalm, 2012; Nyberg-Sørensen, Van Hear & Engberg-Pedersen, 2002). States attempted to install a zero immigration policy and expected (unemployed) foreign workers still present on their territory to return to their home countries (Brücker *et al*., 2002; Entzinger, 1985).

In order to encourage and prepare foreign labourers to return and to overcome constraints in the return process, several West-European governments started to develop special programmes to assist the voluntary return of migrants (Entzinger, 1985; Webber, 2011). These first AVR programmes offered financial departure incentives, pre-return training, and business investment in the country of return. However, they did not lead to an increases in the number of returnees and soon

closed down. Still, these measures legitimated the feeling that return was the natural end of the migration cycle (Hammar, 1985 as cited in Entzinger, 1985).

1.2.2 The problem of non-return: Development of return migration policies

In the 1990s, the perception of migration as a social problem escalated. Firstly, the rising numbers of asylum seekers created a fear of uncontrolled 'inflows' and a 'sense of crisis' in receiving countries, feelings that intensified further after the events of 9/11 (Bloch & Schuster, 2005; Lindstrøm, 2005). The entry of migrants was not only perceived as a problem for the national economy and its welfare system, but also considered a threat to the entire social order (Lindstrøm, 2005; Munck, 2008; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). Consequently, the social construction of migration as a security issue was used to justify states' actions to tighten up their migration policy and to pursue even more restrictive and repressive measures, such as reinforced border controls, restrictions on entry and residence, and the strengthening of deterrence, including detention and deportation, all aimed at limiting and controlling migration flows, and at excluding migrant groups who were perceived as 'unwanted' (Cassarino, 2008; Lindstrøm, 2005; Munck, 2008; Walters, 2002). Not only the entry of new migrants was considered a problem, but also the fact that asylum seekers whose applications were rejected did not automatically return to their home country (Blitz, Sales, & Marzano, 2005; Noll, 1999). States tried to solve this 'problem of (non-)return' by focusing on effective return of migrants without a legal residence permit through the development of a return migration policy (Cassarino, 2014), in which a distinction was made between policy measures for forced return or deportation, and voluntary return. In the policy discourse, 'voluntary return' refers to returning out of 'free' will (or compliance with an 'order to return to the country of origin' without the use of force), and 'forced return' means a return that is enforced by compulsory physical transportation out of the host country (EMN, 2011) (for a broader elaboration of the concept 'voluntariness', see 1.3.1 and 1.4.2.2).

1.2.2.1 Voluntary return policy

From the perspective of receiving countries, *voluntary return* became seen as the ideal solution for economic migrants, refugees and asylum seekers alike: return of skilled migrants leads to brain gain, and enables the development of the country of origin; the return of refugees enhances the peace-building process in post-conflict areas and is an accomplishment of refugees' 'right to return'; and the return of rejected asylum seekers demonstrates the integrity of the host country's

asylum system (Black & Gent, 2006; Jeffery & Murison, 2011; Sinatti, 2011; Van Houte, 2014).

Although initial AVR programmes focused on the return of labour migrants (see 1.2.1), the changed political and economic situation and increasing restrictive attitudes towards asylum seekers led in 1979 to the development of the first AVR programmes for rejected asylum applicants in Germany, based on the idea that providing return assistance to these migrants was cheaper than prolonging their stay in the host country (Noll, 1999). Originally, this assistance only paid for travel-related costs; later on, governmental programmes also facilitated reintegration processes in the country of origin (Noll, 1999; Schneider & Kreienbrink, 2010). Various West-European countries followed soon in developing programmes to assist the return of asylum seekers, especially those whose asylum claim was rejected (Ghosh, 2000; Matrix Insight, 2012), since voluntary return was considered a more humane and cheaper 'solution' than forced removal (Black & Gent, 2006; Noll, 1999).

1.2.2.2 Forced return policy

Also detention and deportation of people who do not (longer) have the legal right to reside on a state's territory became a high political priority in West-European states since the mid-1990s (Anderson, Gibney, & Paoletti, 2011; Bloch & Schuster, 2005). In order to maintain and enforce the 'integrity' of states' immigration and asylum systems and their right to control who enters and remains on their territory, governments started to tighten up their detention and deportation policies and expand their detention capacity with the intention of increasing the number of effective expulsions of irregular migrants and rejected asylum seekers (De Giorgi, 2006; Van Kalmthout, 2007).

1.2.2 The management of migration: Efficiency of return policy

Since the early 2000s, return policies of European Member States have been predominantly, if not exclusively, viewed as instruments for combating unauthorized migration and thereby focus on the return of asylum seekers, rejected asylum seekers and undocumented migrants (Cassarino, 2014). By the idea that existing policy instruments were outdated and inefficient to respond to new migration challenges (Geiger & Pécoud, 2010), and in line with a broader management process in the public sector and evolutions in the contemporary modern society (Clarke & Newman, 1997), the policy discourse of 'migration management' emerged (Geiger & Pécoud, 2010).

The paradigm of migration management described international migration as a permanent and increasingly complex phenomenon in terms of patterns, causes

and categories of movement, that cannot and should not be 'controlled', but should be 'managed' to maximize its potential economic and social benefits (Kalm, 2012; Oelgemöller, 2011). This discourse thus did not longer approach migration as a problem or a security threat, but argued that when migration is managed well, it can lead to a 'triple win situation', in which migration benefits receiving states, sending states and migrants (Kalm, 2012). Yet, in order to realize the efficient management of migration, 'coherence' is needed between different policy area's and policy levels that address the topic of migration (Geiger & Pécoud, 2010; Kalm, 2012). Therefore, a coherent European return policy regarding the return of rejected asylums seekers and undocumented migrants, based on common principles, common measures and common standards was called for, to replace the national policies of members states which tended to be made on an ad hoc basis (Cherti & Szilard, 2013; Geiger & Pécoud, 2010). Different instruments, such as the European Return Fund and the EU Returns Directive, were developed to promote the harmonization of European return policies, and to support Member States to realize an 'integrated return management', which comprises both programmes and measures of voluntary ánd forced return, with a preference to voluntary return (Cherti & Szilard, 2013; Schneider & Kreienbrink, 2010). Through the European Return Fund, funds became available for EU Member States to set up voluntary return and reintegration programmes, to create specific assistance for vulnerable returnees such as unaccompanied minors, and to develop tools and actions through the sharing of best practice between EU states (Cherti & Szilard, 2013).

When looking at practices of forced return, researchers have seen an increase in the use and in the capacity of detention across the EU (Cherti & Szilard, 2013; Flynn, 2013; Leerkes & Broeders, 2010), this despite the priority given to voluntary return over forced return, and the encouragement of alternatives to detention by EU legislation (Black & Gent, 2006; EMN, 2014a; Schneider & Kreienbrink, 2010). However, there is little research on the impact of this contemporary expansion of detention practices on the detained migrants' wellbeing, as current research focuses onto the policy level, hereby unwittingly excluding detainees' lived experiences and their perspectives on detention practices (Bosworth, 2012; Silverman & Massa, 2012).

When looking at voluntary return measures, the emphasis on the important role of voluntary return in the migration policies of European countries led to the inclusion of return and reintegration support to migrants as an integral part of the return migration policies, and to a clear proliferation of new AVR programmes over the last 20 years (Black, Collyer, & Sommerville, 2011; IOM, 2014; Schneider & Kreienbrink, 2010). For example, the number of AVR programmes implemented by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), together with European

Member States, rose from four in 1994 to 18 in 2004, and as many as 26 in 2011 (IOM, 2004, 2012). As a result, the number of people returning through IOM with governmental support also increased, from 26,763 in 2004 to 46,233 in 2013 (IOM, 2014), with a slight decrease to 43,786 persons in 2014 (IOM, 2015a). Assisted voluntary return is presented as a dignified, humane and cost-effective alternative for forced removal (Thiel & Gillan, 2010), and reintegration support should serve as an extra incentive to encourage migrants to return voluntary and facilitate a sustainable return (Matrix Insight, 2012). However, despite the rising numbers of migrants returning with AVR support, the preponderance of return in migration policies and the emphasis on the contribution of reintegration support to the sustainability of return, little is known about these returnees' experiences and how they manage to build up their lives after return (Black *et al*., 2004; Black & Gent, 2006; Carr, 2014; Cassarino, 2008; Van Houte & De Koning, 2008).

In the following section, we first describe the content of assisted voluntary return support, followed by a discussion of the concepts 'voluntariness' and 'sustainability' as key elements that support the adoption and implementation of voluntary return and reintegration programmes (Cassarino, 2014). Hereafter, we give a short overview of the content of AVR programmes in EU host countries, before outlining the content and target groups of the Belgian AVR programme.

1.3 Assisted voluntary return support

According to IOM the term 'assisted voluntary return' refers to 'administrative, logistic, financial and reintegration support to rejected asylum seekers, victims of trafficking in human beings, stranded migrants, qualified nationals and other migrants unable or unwilling to remain in the host country who volunteer to return to their countries of origin' (IOM, 2015b, Key migration terms, para.2).

In the pre-return phase in the host country, the support package can include counselling to support the return-decision process, legal counselling, provision of information, medical and psycho-social support, provision of necessary travel documents and travel arrangements, financial support and temporary accommodation. During the return itself, the support often comprises financial assistance (e.g., payment of travel tickets and luggage costs), and escort during the flight and/or during transit. In the post-return phase in the country of origin, the support may involve transport from the airport to the final destination, and short or medium-term reintegration assistance, which can include support to set up an income-generating activity, vocational training, education, housing, medical assistance and other tailor-made assistance in relation to the returnees' needs (IOM, 2015c; Matrix Insight, 2012).

In this research, we use the term AVR as umbrella term for all kinds of return support in pre-return, during return and/or post-return phase, and the term 'assisted voluntary return and reintegration' (AVRR) to refer to support that also includes post-return reintegration assistance. Although 'reintegration support' is included in the term 'assisted voluntary return' according to the definition of IOM, some assisted voluntary return programmes comprise only travel support (i.e., the support to make the physical return possible) without additional post-return reintegration assistance. This makes it often unclear what is comprised in the term 'assisted support', unless the additional reintegration support is explicitly mentioned.

1.3.1 Voluntariness

Although AVR programmes operate without physical enforcement, and clearly differ from forced return measures, the 'voluntariness' of returning within these programmes remains contested (Blitz *et al*., 2005; Webber, 2011). Webber (2011, p. 103) argues that "virtually none of the schemes currently operating as 'voluntary return programmes' from Europe meet the criteria for voluntariness", whereby 'voluntary' is understood as "genuine, not induced choice", what in practice would mean that the returnee (at least) has a legal basis to stay in the host country. Therefore, it is argued that AVR programmes "developed into the involuntary return of migrants who had no legal permission to stay and who returned because this was the 'least worse option' in a 'no win situation'" (Van Houte, 2014, p. 54; see also Blitz *et al*., 2005; Foblets & Vanbeselaere, 2005; Thiel & Gillan, 2010).

According to Noll (1999), prioritizing voluntary return and labelling it as 'voluntary' is of considerable importance for governments, since this is often a prerequisite for international organizations to cooperate with governments in implementing these programmes, and this labelling also enlarges the acceptability of the return policy for the wider public. This 'voluntary' label also seems to suggest that this type of returning is a 'safe', 'normal' or 'natural' form of migration, without any detrimental consequences for migrants' wellbeing (Vathi & Duci, 2016). Black and Gent (2006) argue that the interest in voluntary return may also simply reflect the lack of political will to enforce removal since voluntary return asks less administrative efforts.

However, this policy-based label of 'voluntary return' and the strong distinction between forced and voluntary return based on the use of force, are not similar to returnees' experiences of their return (Blitz *et al*., 2005; Cassarino, 2004; Turton, 2003; Van Houte, 2014). Black and Gent (2006), referring to the work of Morrison (2006), state that different degrees of 'voluntariness' can be identified in voluntary return programmes. It can be a clear and open choice, but it can also be

a choice between "returning voluntarily when asked to do so, perhaps gaining financial or other incentives as a result, or staying and risking forcible return at some time in the future" (Black & Gent, 2006, p. 19). Further, even within voluntary programmes, 'voluntary' can only mean 'the absence of force' when the migrant is been given no choice at all. Several authors therefore use different terms to refer to AVR. Black and colleagues (2011) for example use the term 'non-coercive return programmes' to cover the range of support programmes from those that are genuinely voluntary to those that are options of last resort. Leerkes and Boersema (2014) suggest the term 'soft deportation' to refer to AVR.

In this research, the choice was made to use the term assisted voluntary return to refer to these programmes, though acknowledging that this is a policy term that needs to be challenged in the framework of the lived experiences of the returnees themselves.

1.3.2 Sustainability

As mentioned above, additional reintegration support was added to voluntary return programmes in order to increase the willingness of asylum seekers, rejected asylum seekers and undocumented migrants in European host countries to return to their country of origin and to facilitate the *sustainability* of their return (Koser, 2001; Thiel & Gillan, 2010). The objective of EU reintegration policy is to promote 'sustainable return' (Matrix Insight, 2012), yet it is unclear how such sustainability should be defined or measured (Black & Gent, 2006; HIT Foundation, 2010; Whyte & Hirslund, 2013).

A distinction can be made between a narrow and a broad definition of sustainability in government discourses (Black & Gent, 2006). In the first, a 'sustainable return' refers to the absence of migrants' remigration. A wider definition of sustainability involves both the reintegration of individual returnees in their home societies, and the wider impact of return on macroeconomic and political indicators (Black & Gent, 2006). The latter links sustainable returns to the development of the country of origin (Åkesson & Baaz, 2015; Van Houte & Davids, 2008). Linking return and development is not new in European policies (De Haas, 2010), yet, the broadening of the types of return that are targeted in the development debate is quite new (Sinatti & Horst, 2015). While ancient discussions on migration and development have focused on highly qualified or successful economic migrants, recently, any kind of return receives attention in the framework of this debate (Sinatti & Horst, 2015). Various countries in the European Union explicitly link their AVRR programmes for rejected asylum seekers and undocumented migrants to developmental goals (HIT Foundation, 2010; Van Houte, 2014).

Although AVRR policies are applied on a large scale throughout Western Europe (see 1.2.3), and the added value of reintegration support is explicitly placed in its contribution to sustainable returns, there has been remarkably little monitoring of the programmes by the funding governments, and little is known about the post-return experiences and reintegration process of these returnees (Black *et al*., 2011; Cherti & Szilard, 2013; HIT Foundation, 2010; Koser & Kuschminder, 2015; Van Houte, 2014; Webber, 2011).

This lack of follow-up of returnees is due to several reasons. The lack of a consensus about the definition of reintegration, and therefore, the lack of tools to measure the impact of the support may be a first explanatory hypothesis (Koser & Kuschminder, 2015). Second, it is argued that limited funds, the short-term focus of the assistance, and the fact that the assistance programmes are often performed on a time-limited project base hamper the collection of data on the lives of returnees, and prevents a longitudinal follow-up of the returnees and their wellbeing beyond the projects' time frame (Cherti & Szilard, 2013; D'Onofrio, 2004; Koser & Kuschminder, 2015; Whyte & Hirslund, 2013). A third explanation ventilates a more fundamental critique on the underlying assumptions in dominant West-European policy discourses on return migration and its top-down framework of understanding. This lack of monitoring of AVRR programmes can been seen as illustrative for the fact that mainly domestic interests of controlling migration and removing unwanted migrants from states' territory are driving the policy-making agenda (Blitz *et al*., 2005; Cassarino, 2008). This makes that the issue of reintegration stays marginal in hierarchy of governmental priorities (Cassarino, 2008). Consequently, the challenges posed by the circumstances encountered upon return and the needs of returnees remain largely unacknowledged and tensions and contradictions arise between the policy discourse on return migration and migrants' actual practices, experiences and realities (Åkesson & Baaz, 2015; Cassarino, 2008; Hammond, 1999). Furthermore, this clearly contrasts with the aim of reintegration policies and AVR programmes to facilitate returnees' reintegration (Cassarino, 2008; Matrix Insight, 2012), and therefore, raises questions about the programmes' objectives, in relation with certain evolutions in migration policy.

However, not only the post-return situations and wellbeing of returnees remain largely out of sight, also the support processes are not yet studied, and there is little knowledge on how post-return reintegration support processes are implemented in the countries of origin and on how these are perceived by both returnees and practitioners (see 1.3.4.2).

1.3.3 Assisted voluntary return programmes in the EU

AVR programmes can be implemented by national governmental agencies themselves, though they are mostly outsourced to partner organizations, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) , and most often to IOM (EMN, 2011; Matrix Insight, 2012). Up to date, all European Member States[1] are implementing or have been implementing an AVR programme recently (EMN, 2014b; Matrix Insight, 2012). The majority of AVR programmes is developed by EU Member States, yet the implementation of AVR is not limited to the European context, since it is implemented by numerous host and transit countries in all regions of the world (IOM, 2011, 2014). The AVR programmes are often targeted, country-specific and time-limited programmes, arising in response to particular policy pressures or the availability of funds, while other countries, like Belgium, UK and the Netherlands, developed broader, continuous return frameworks (Whyte & Hirslund, 2013).

Yet, the types of support that are included into different national AVR programmes vary widely. This is clearly illustrated by the study of Matrix Insight (2012), which gives an overview of the content of the AVR support in the 27 EU Members States and the four Schengen Associated States (i.e., Switzerland, Iceland, Norway and Lichtenstein) in 2011. The study shows how AVR support can vary from only the publication of information guides to support returnees in the pre-return phase (i.e., Cyprus), to comprehensive support packages, such as the AVRR programme for rejected asylum seekers from Kosovo developed by the Danish Red Cross. In this latter project, support included counselling and legal assistance in the pre-departure phase, travel assistance during the return, and both financial support (to be used for vocational training, education, set-up of small businesses, temporary accommodation and medical assistance) and support in accessing local authorities in the post-arrival phase (Matrix Insight, 2012).

Further, not only the types of support vary extensively, also the amount of the reintegration budget and the ways this is handed to returnees vary considerably in the different Member States, and depend on the resources the specific host country wants to invest in this programme (IOM, 2015b; Koser & Kuschminder, 2015). Therefore, reintegration support can range from immediate cash assistance or pocket money of a few hundred euros, to in-kind assistance (i.e., when the reintegration budget is given in the form of material goods or services instead of given in cash to the returnee) up to 7,000 euro (EMN, 2011; Koser & Kuschminder, 2015).

[1] This includes the 27 EU Member States as well as the 3 Schengen Associated States (Switzerland, Norway and Liechtenstein). No information could be found on the existence of AVRR support in Iceland.

And to make the divergence complete, also the types of migrants eligibly for AVR vary strongly in different host countries. Most programmes provide assistance to asylum seekers, rejected asylum seekers and undocumented migrants, though each host country has specific entry criteria for their programme, and countries often create multiple programmes with specific support packages for particular groups (e.g., unaccompanied minors, victims of human trafficking, graduated students) or target for specific nationalities (Matrix Insight, 2012). Recently, several Member States have induced stricter entry criteria that considerable reduces the number of people eligible for AVR support (Fedasil, 2013; Thiel & Gillan, 2010).

Overall, this clearly leads to a patchwork of (often temporary) AVR programmes, being implemented by different actors, and starting from different eligibility criteria, target groups, ways of operating and types of support. In what follows, we describe the content and eligibility criteria of the Belgian AVR programme at the time of the sampling of the participants for this study (January 2010 – April 2012).

1.3.4 The Belgian AVR programme

1.3.4.1 Target group and types of support

In 1984, Belgium was the second country to develop an AVR programme for (rejected) asylum seekers: the 'Return and Emigration of Asylum Seekers Ex Belgium' programme (Fedasil, 2009a; Matrix Insight, 2012).

From January 2010 until April 2012, the entry criteria of the programme were determined as "anyone without a permanent residence permit, irrespective of administrative antecedents, on condition that people with a temporary (asylum seekers) or permanent (recognized refugees) residence permit relinquish their status and residence permit prior to admission to the programme" (Fedasil, 2009a, p. 8). The programme's main target groups were, however, defined as asylum seekers who abandoned their claim, rejected asylum seekers and undocumented migrants who had not applied for asylum (Fedasil, 2009a). Thus, migrants returning with the Belgian AVR programmes were migrants who had an insecure[2] or no residence status when the decision to return was made. In this research, we will refer to this group as *returnees with a precarious residence status*. Furthermore, only non-EU citizens and members of 'new' EU Members States (i.e., countries who joined the EU in 2004 and 2007) could enter the

[2] As long as an asylum request is pending, asylum applicants receive a temporary residence permit. This permit ends when the migrant's application is rejected; he/she then receives an order to leave the territory (Kruispunt Migratie-Integratie, 2015).

programme[3] (Fedasil, 2011), and there were stricter criteria for undocumented migrants and for the different layers of support, as illustrated in figure 1.1. Concretely, the AVR programme consisted of three increasing layers of support.

The first level, referred to as 'travel support', aimed at enabling returnees' physical return, and included pre-departure counselling, travel costs (e.g., flight ticket, luggage), assistance during flight transit, and an optional small cash sum (i.e., max. 250 euro for an adult, 125 euro for a child, paid in cash at the airport) to compensate for the cost of travel from the airport to the final destination (Fedasil, 2009b; Matrix Insight, 2012).

A second level of support, referred to as 'reintegration support', aimed at facilitating reintegration and the restarting of returnees' life in the country of origin. It included material support in the country of origin and some additional support for particular vulnerable groups (Fedasil, 2009a). This material support consisted of 700 euro per person (maximum 1,750 euro per family), and, in the case of vulnerable groups (i.e., pregnant women, unaccompanied minors, victims of human trafficking, elderly people, persons with a handicap or a severe illness), another 500 euro were added (Fedasil, 2009a, 2010a). The budget could be used for payment of training and schooling, legal, administrative or psychological support, job placement, or accommodation, furniture, transport, medical support and income-generating activities (Fedasil, 2010b).

A third level of support, referred to as 'enhanced reintegration support', increased the individual reintegration support with 1500 euro for returning migrants who wanted to start a microbusiness and for particular 'vulnerable' groups (Fedasil, 2010a).

[3] Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia joined the EU in 2004, Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 (Fedasil, 2011).

Figure 1.1: Overview of the eligibility criteria for the Belgian AVR programme (January 2010)

	Travel support *level 1*	**Reintegration support** *levels 2 and 3*
Asylum seekers	YES *Non EU and new EU states*	YES *Non EU*
Rejected asylum seekers	YES *Non EU and new EU states*	YES *Non EU*
Undocumented migrants	YES *Non EU* *New EU: more than 3 months in Belgium*	YES *Non EU –* *minimum 12 months in Belgium*

Thus, some migrants returning within the Belgian AVR programme only received travel support. However, all the assisted returnees of this study received additional reintegration support.

1.3.4.2 The implementation of AVR support

The travel support was from the start outsourced to IOM, who collaborated with a network of NGOs, reception centres and local authorities to reach the target group and to provide pre-departure counselling (Fedasil, 2009a). This pre-departure counselling by social workers in refugee reception centres and local social welfare services consisted of support and advice in the return-decision process, information about entry criteria and about the support before and after return, and guidance on acquiring travel documents. The arrangement of the flight tickets was done by IOM Brussels (Fedasil, 2011; IOM, 2015b).

For the implementation of the reintegration support (level 2 and 3), the Belgian government contracted two 'reintegration partners', the IOM and the NGO Caritas International Belgium (hereafter referred to as Caritas Belgium). Both collaborated with partner organizations in the countries to which migrants return. The reintegration support consisted of several elements.

In Belgium, the returnee received information about the scope and conditions of the support, and his/her reintegration plan was prepared and sent to the local partner organization to check its feasibility. Reintegration plans set the modalities for spending the reintegration support money, and generally aimed at facilitating small-scale, individual projects which help returnees to restart their lives and to reintegrate in the country of origin. The reintegration budget could be used to pay for training and schooling, external support (e.g., support to find a job, legal or psychological support), costs related to returnees' installation (e.g., temporary housing or basic house equipment and furniture); medical support; income-generating activities; and support before departure (e.g., translation costs of documents relevant for the reintegration process or additional luggage assistance) (Fedasil, 2010b).

After return, the partner organization in the country of origin gave the returnee administrative and financial support, and guidance on how to use the allocated reintegration budget (Fedasil, 2009a, 2011). The returnee did not receive the reintegration budget in cash, but the support was provided in-kind: the purchases and payments of goods and services were done by the local partner organization. The reintegration support lasted from six months up to one year after return. The local partner monitored the returnee's situation through home visits and meetings. Once the support was finished, the local partner wrote a report on the guidance and financial support, including receipts for purchases, for the Belgian reintegration partner, as part of the latter's obligations to the Belgian government and the European Commission (Caritas International, 2014; Fedasil, 2010b).

However, our insights into the specific modes of implementation of AVRR support remains limited, in the Belgian context and beyond. First, there is scant systematic analysis of how the reintegration budget is used, how it intervenes in the reintegration process and wellbeing of returnees, and how returnees evaluate the received reintegration support. Further, little attention is given to the support processes: there is no insight into how practitioners in the country of origin translate the AVRR programme into concrete practices in their daily work, although they find themselves in a special position, having to implement a support programme created by West-European governments, but which takes place in a very different setting. The perspectives and interpretations of practitioners implementing reintegration support in the countries of origin are yet totally absent from the debate. For respondents of this study, who return with reintegration support provided by Caritas Belgium, the guidance after return is given by a social worker in the partner organization in the country of origin, yet no research exists on social workers' perspectives on the implementations of AVRR support.

1.3.4.3 Particularities of the Belgian AVR programme

The Belgian programme had some specific features compared with some other programmes in European countries. First, the amount of the reintegration budget for an individual returnee (i.e., reintegration support plus enhanced reintegration support gives a maximum of 2200 euro, see 1.3.4.1) was comparable with the reintegration budget in other counties like the Netherlands, Hungary, Finland, Italy. However, it was more generous than the AVRR budget for returnees in other countries, such as Austria (500 euro) or Germany (700 euro), yet quit small compared with the maximum budgets given in for example Denmark (up to 16,000 euro) or France (up to 7,000 euro) (Matrix Insight, 2012). Second, the first two level of support were embedded in a structural, nationally subsidized programme, which allowed to create a continuous AVR programme rather than the time-limited project that are typical in most EU countries (Whyte & Hirslund 2013). Third, the Belgian AVR programme was characterized by a large involvement of NGOs in the implementation of support, both in the pre-return and in the post-return phase (see 1.4.3.2).

After this overview of the content of AVR support and AVR programmes, we outline in the following section how the topic of return migration is addressed in the existing bodies of migration studies, before turning to our research questions and study design.

1.4 Understanding return migration

1.4.1 Return migration in migration theories

Migration research aims at providing a framework to understand the determinants and the impact of migration (Castles, 2010; King, 2000; Levitt & Lamba-Nieves, 2011). Due to the complexity and the diversity of migration experiences and the interdisciplinary nature of the field of migration studies, there is no generally accepted theoretical framework on the international mobility of people in social-scientific research (Castles, 2010). Various theories (e.g., neoclassical theories, new economics of labour migration, structural, transnational and social network frameworks) have described factors influencing return migration, hereby, contributing to a better understanding of the phenomenon and of the dynamics of return processes. Several authors give a detailed historical overview about these different theoretical approaches, their underlying assumptions, how they have dealt with return migration, and how this have led to shifting understandings of return migration over time (for overviews see: e.g., Cassarino, 2004; De Haas, Fokkema, & Fihri, 2015; Hunter, 2011; Van Houte, 2014).

Different theoretical approaches and diverse explanatory models demonstrate a range of both economic and non-economic factors, on micro-, meso- and macro-level, which motivate and shape return processes. De Haas and colleagues argue (2015) that there is no uniform process of return migration, and "competing theories might be complementary in explaining return migration intentions and behaviours occurring between and within specific migrant groups and within specific origin and destination contexts" (De Haas *et al*., 2015, p. 427). Hence, this urges for attention for the heterogeneity of the group of return migrants, and exposes the need to identify the influencing factors under various specific circumstances of return migration (Cassarino, 2004; De Haas *et al*., 2015).

Two lines of research can be distinguished within the study field of return migration: studies that focus on migrants before they return, and researches examining returnees' post-return situations.

1.4.2 Pre-return: The return decision process

In the first research line, scholars focus on migrants' decision processes – whether to return or not – which take place in the host country, hereby trying to understand the motives of migrants in host countries to return to the country of origin, the factors influencing this decision-making process and the voluntariness of this decision. Researchers have shown that the decision to return is a complex process, whereby migrants seem to simultaneously weigh multiple considerations, and, eventually, return for a complex of interconnected reasons, rather than just decide on basis of one single return motive (Cassarino, 2004; De Haas, 2011; King, 2000; Senyürekli & Menjivar, 2012). In what follows, we give an overview of the research on the return motives and the voluntariness of the return of migrants with a precarious residence status in the host country.

1.4.2.1 Return motives

Investigating the return decision processes of migrants who would potentially return through an AVR programme, Black and colleagues (2004) identify a range of economic, social, personal and political factors in the host and home countries that influence migrants' decisions to return or to stay. These authors conclude that conditions in the home country have a larger influence on the return decision than conditions in the host country. Further, they find no associations between the respondents' legal status and their return motives. In contrast, a study of the views of Afghan residents in the UK on return and AVR programmes points out that migrants' residence status is the most important factor affecting their desire to return, with those awaiting a decision on their asylum application and others with a precarious residence status being the least interested in return (Blitz *et al*., 2005). Furthermore, a number of researchers argue that political factors in a the

home country (peace and security) are of primary importance in the decision-making processes (Black *et al*., 2004; Blitz *et al*., 2005; Van Wijk, 2008), while the availability of support programmes in the host country seems to have little influence (Black *et al*., 2004). Decision processes on return are thus possibly impacted by a range of different factors framed in the particular social contexts (Black *et al*., 2004; Senyürekli & Menjivar, 2012; Zimmermann, 2012). At the same time, individuals also make personal choices and exert agency; these factors are thus not simply a series of deterministic elements (De Haas, 2011).

All these studies are based on migrants' hypothetical return intentions and the decision-making processes of potential returnees, which might significantly differ from the actual return motives of returnees, given that the correlation between migrants' intentions and their actual behaviour is weak, and intentions may change over time (Black *et al*., 2004; De Haas *et al*., 2015). Hence, this urges for research on return motives and perspectives of migrants who have made the decision to return.

1.4.2.2 Voluntariness of the return

These questions about migrants' motives for returning (or not) and the possibilities they have to exert agency during the migration process relate to the notion of 'voluntariness', which is a central notion in migration studies (Ottonelli & Torresi, 2013). Scholars increasingly argue that this distinction between forced and voluntary migration is blurred, since decisions to migrate are often a response to a complex set of factors of both compulsion and choice (Turton, 2003; Van Hear, Brubaker, & Bessa, 2009). Therefore, a dichotomous approach (forced versus voluntary migration), and consequently, a clear-cut distinction between forced and voluntary return does not reflect the reality and complexity of returnees' experiences, and therefore hampers our understanding of the return processes and the formulation of adequate measures to support returnees (Cassarino, 2004; De Haas, 2005; Ottonelli & Torresi, 2013; Pedersen, 2003; Van Houte, 2014; Zimmermann, 2012). Yet, it remains unclear how returnees themselves experience these elements of compulsion and choice in the return decision process, in particular for those migrants who have a precarious residence status in the host country, such as the target groups of AVR programmes (i.e. asylum seekers, rejected asylum seekers and undocumented migrants), yet also for migrants who are detained in detention centres, awaiting their forced repatriation to the country of origin (Blitz *et al*., 2005; Turton, 2003).

1.4.3 Post-return experiences

A second group of studies focuses on returnees' post-return situations: they highlight the way returnees manage or struggle to reintegrate and build up their

lives in the country of origin, and study issues of identity, home and belonging among returnees.

Scholars indicate that returning 'home' or returning to the 'homeland' is not a simple homecoming or an easy return to a familiar and comfortable context one belongs to (D'Onofrio, 2004; Eastmond, 2001; Ghanem, 2003; Hammond, 1999). Changes in the home country, changes in the attitudes and perspectives of returnees due to their migration experience, and socio-political and economic challenges in the country of return, all constitute a return process as an arrival at a new place (Hammond, 1999; Ruben, Van Houte, & Davids, 2009), which is sometimes experienced even more difficult than the initial migration (Black & Gent, 2006; Markowitz & Stefansson, 2004). Further, return does not necessarily mark the permanent end of people's migration process (Black & Koser, 1999; Black *et al.*, 2004; Ruben *et al.*, 2009), but needs to be conceived as a phase in a dynamic and ongoing process (Eastmond, 2006; King, 2000; Ruben *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, return processes should not be conceptualized as 'natural', 'unproblematic', or 'static' phenomena, but as multi-phased, multi-layered, complex and contested processes and experiences (Black *et al.*, 2004; King, 2000; Markowitz & Stefansson, 2004; Ruben *et al.*, 2009), which require time (Cassarino, 2014) or sometimes never end (Ghanem, 2003). Moreover, returnees are a very heterogeneous group in terms of their migration experiences, length of stay abroad, patterns of resource mobilization, legal status, motivations and post-return projects, and consequently, large differentiated reintegration processes and post-return realities can be expected (Cassarino, 2004).

In the following section, we take a closer look at the return preparedness theory of Cassarino (2004, 2008) which is the only theoretical model that explains different reintegration processes and differences in returnees' post-return situations across different contexts (Van Meeteren *et al.*, 2014). Subsequently, we summarize the available empirical evidence on the post-return experiences of 'voluntary' returnees (those returning without physical force) who had a precarious residence status in the host country.

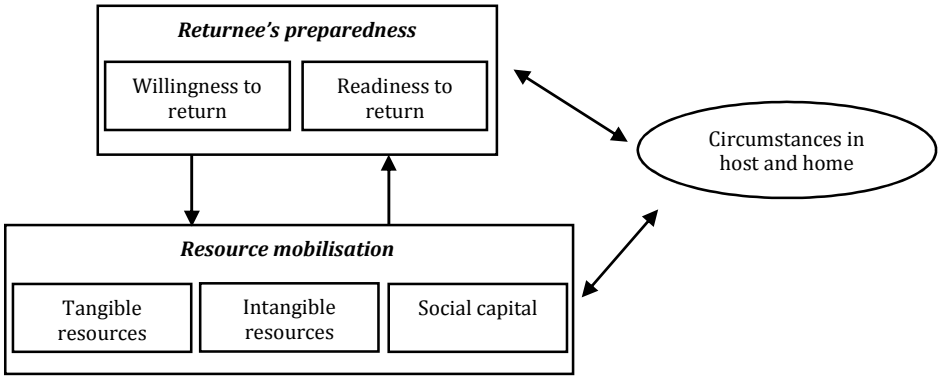
1.4.3.1 Return preparedness

Cassarino (2004, 2008) introduced a theoretical model of 'return preparedness', which attempts to explain the plurality of post-return conditions faced by returnees and their various patterns of reintegration (see figure 1.2).

The author defines this concept of 'return preparedness' as, firstly, the free will of migrants to choose to return (willingness to return), and, secondly, the readiness to return, particularly the abilities to collect resources (i.e., tangible resources, intangible resources and social capital) that are needed to return. Both elements

are, according to Cassarino, strongly influenced by circumstances in host and home country, and influence the outcomes of the return process.

Figure 1.2: Return preparation (Cassarino, 2004, p. 180)



By highlighting possible variations in migrants' willingness and readiness to return, this model captures that return is not always a voluntary act. Further, its emphasis on the process of resources mobility stresses the need to view return as on ongoing process. As such, the model can include the return of various types of migrants, also of migrants returning with AVR programmes. The theoretical model of Cassarino classifies rejected asylum seekers and undocumented migrants as returnees with an interrupted migration cycle due to their precarious residence status, which renders their level of preparedness very low, or even non-existing, and hampers their abilities to reintegrate (Cassarino, 2004, 2014).

However, empirical evidence on the return and reintegration experiences and lived realities of returnees who had a precarious residence status in the host country is scarce (see 1.3.2; Black *et al.*, 2004; Carr, 2014; Cassarino, 2008; Zimmermann, 2012). The available, but still limited, studies on the post-return situations and wellbeing of this group of returnees are discussed below.

1.4.3.2 Post-return situation and wellbeing of returnees with a precarious residence status in the host country

The main part of empirical research on the post-return situations of returnees who had a precarious residence status in the host country and who are returning voluntarily, both with and without governmental support, investigates whether these post-return situations are 'sustainable' (Black *et al.*, 2004; Riiskjaer & Nielsson, 2008; Thiel & Gillan, 2010) or 'embedded' returns (Carr, 2014; Ruben *et al.*, 2009), as reflected in different life domains and measured through both socio-economic indicators and returnees' subjective perspectives (Black *et al.*, 2004;

Davids & Van Houte, 2008; Thiel & Gillan, 2010). These studies, all based on cross-sectional data, both quantitative and qualitative, sketch a rather negative image.

First, returnees' primary challenge concerns establishing a material base of living (Pedersen, 2003), a process that often turns out to be difficult. Ruben and colleagues (2009) analyse the situation of 178 returnees in six different countries and conclude that only a few returnees were capable of creating an independent livelihood. A vital factor influencing returnees' post-return situations is the context of the home country. The poor political, economic and social infrastructures in the country of origin, the lack of access to housing facilities and employment, and feelings unsafety owing to material insecurity and instability all complicate the return process (Black *et al.*, 2004; Riiskjaer & Nielsson, 2008; Thiel & Gillan, 2010; Van Houte & De Koning, 2008). According to Pedersen (2003), also returnees' access to transnational resources, may enable returnees' establishment of a material home, however, the transnational connections of migrants returning with a precarious residence status remain largely understudied.

Second, many returnees lack or lose access to local social ties after return (Riiskjaer & Nielsson, 2008; Thiel & Gillan, 2010), inhibiting returnees' ability to create a home and to feel accepted after returned, since social networks are indispensable sources of material and emotional support (Pedersen, 2003; Ruben *et al*., 2009; Thiel & Gillan, 2010). Yet, Davids and Van Houte (2008) argue that these social networks often only give emotional support, and that only returnees from privileged socio-economic backgrounds have access to social relations which can help to create a livelihood, such as employment (Pedersen, 2003; Van Houte & De Koning, 2008).

Accordingly, questions arise about returnees' feelings of belonging to the country of origin; yet the empirical evidence is less consistent here. According to Pedersen (2003), returnees' primary concerns relate to their material living conditions, and questions of identity and belonging only gain importance once a material base of living is well established. In contrast, other scholars point to the primary importance of feelings of non-belonging amongst returnees (Riiskjaer & Nielsson, 2008), or, in contrast, indicate that the material hardships returnees are confronted with do not prevent the majority of the returnees from feeling at home after their return (Van Houte & De Koning, 2008).

However, most of these empirical studies on returnees' post-return situations draw on pre-constructed domains that are important for a successful return (Black *et al*., 2004; Riiskjaer & Nielsson, 2008; Ruben *et al*., 2009; Thiel & Gillan, 2010). Hence, these methods possibly overlook the subjective significance of different elements in returnees' post-return lives. Besides, although the conceptualizations of return migration stress that return is a multi-locational and

ongoing *process* which requires *time*, there has not been any longitudinal research on the post-return realities of these returnees. Cross-sectional studies, in one place and at one moment, cannot fully capture the complex and dynamic character of the return process (Alcock, 2004). This reveals the need for longitudinal research on these migrants' return processes, incorporating returnees' perspectives on their post-return situations and what they identify as crucial impacting factors.

1.5 Research gaps

The in-depth overview of the extant political context and the available scientific evidence on return migration in general, and on the return of migrants with precarious residence status in the host country in particular, has highlighted some important lacunae in the current knowledge on migrants' return processes and post-return experiences:

- Policy discourse on return migration have gradually changed over time. Currently, the importance of AVR is strongly emphasized, however, there is little insight in how the objectives of AVR programmes have evolved over time, in relation with broader changes in migration policy and social welfare policy. This is especially remarkable given the important political emphasis put on voluntary return and reintegration support.
- There is a large gap in our insights into the perspectives, lived experiences and reintegration processes of returnees, in particular of those with a precarious residence status in the host country, of returnees returning with governmental assisted voluntary return programmes and of migrants forcible returned to the country of origin (i.e., migrants in detention centres).
- Despite the conceptualization of return migration as a multi-locational and ongoing process, research on return migration is separated along different phases of the return process, with research on return motivations in host countries before return on the one hand, and cross-sectional research on post-return situations on the other. There is thus a lack of holistic and longitudinal studies on return and reintegration processes of returnees, in particular of those with precarious residence status in the host country, in order to observe possible dynamic changes within the process and to provide insights into the rich complexity of individuals' lives.
- Although AVRR programmes are implemented on a large scale by many European countries, there is little knowledge on how reintegration support is implemented in the countries of origin and how this supports

the post-return situations and wellbeing of migrants returning with such a programme. Additionally, how returnees and social workers perceive and evaluate this support remains largely unknown.

1.6 Problem statement, research questions and aims

1.6.1 Problem statement

The above mentioned lacunae in the knowledge on the return and reintegration processes of this particular group of returnees who have a precarious residence status in the host country, and on the practices of assisted voluntary return and reintegration support are problematic. The current policy discourse on return migration, set without much attention for or evidence about returnees' post-return realities, may lead to unrealistic expectations about the outcomes of return migration and reintegration support, to simplifications of the complexities of return processes and of the realities of returnees (Åkesson & Baaz, 2015; Cassarino, 2008; Hammond, 1999). Consequently, the failure to recognize the realities of returnees receiving reintegration support and social workers implementing this reintegration support, limits the development of appropriate return and reintegration policies (Bakewell, 2008; Carr, 2014), and increases the risk that support interventions being set without listening to and so properly responding to the needs of returnees in particular contexts (Chase, 2013; Zimmermann, 2000). This urges for research on return migration focusing on the perspectives and lived experiences of those returning, since personal experiences challenge the 'collective story' (Eastmond, 2007). Returnees' lived experiences may contest over-generalization and de-individualization promoted by policy discourses, and will shed light on the personal, social and political realities of returnees (Chavez, 1991; Eastmond, 2007; Lawson, 2000). Furthermore, it urges for an examination of how reintegration support is perceived by the different actors involved, how this support is implemented in concrete practices, and how the support intervenes in the reintegration process and wellbeing of returnees.

Tackling these limitations in knowledge on this specific group of returnees is also important for studies of return migration in general, since scholars stress the urge for broadening the analytical and interpretative framework of return migration to address the complexity and heterogeneity of return migration (Bakewell, 2010; Cassarino, 2004). Therefore, the current knowledge on the processes and experiences of returnees needs to be enriched by empirically-based research on the return processes of returnees with a precarious residence status in the host country. This group of migrants has been largely left out of the debate so far, yet

their particular migration trajectory and low preparedness to return can stretch the boundaries of different conceptualizations of return migration.

1.6.2 Research questions

Taking into account the outlined limitations the of current research base, this study seeks to shed light on the dynamic, contextualized and subjective natures of return processes, living conditions and wellbeing of migrants returning with AVRR programmes. More concretely, we set forward the following eight research questions (RQ):

(1) How did the Belgian policy of AVR programmes evolve over time, in relation to broader changes in migration policy?
(2) What are the return motives, the current living conditions and the experienced voluntariness of migrants who decided to return while still living in host country?
(3) What are the post-return situations and lived experiences of the past and current living contexts of returnees during the initial two years after they have returned to the country of origin? What are the changes in returnees' wellbeing and in their evaluations of their current and past living conditions and return processes?
(4) Do returnees' post-return lives contain a transnational dimension and does this transnational dimension impact their post-return situations?
(5) How do returnees' evaluations of the return process and of their wellbeing evolve throughout the return process (from the moment they decided to return until two years after return)?
(6) What are the perspectives of returnees on the reintegration support they received?
(7) What are the perspectives of social workers supporting the returnees in the country of origin on the provided reintegration support?
(8) What are the perspectives of migrants in detention centres on their upcoming return to the country of origin (counter-case)?

1.6.3 Research aims

The overall objective of this study is to increase the knowledge of the return processes and lived experiences of migrants returning within an AVRR programme, and the practices of reintegration support. In pursuing this objective, this study aims to contribute to the empirical base of return migration studies, firstly, by adopting a holistic, multi-sited and longitudinal research design, and secondly, by integrating the return experiences and reintegration processes of this specific group of returnees with a precarious residence status in the host country in the study of return migration, hereby questioning the conceptualization of the

notions of 'voluntariness' and 'transnationalism'. Additionally, by drawing attention onto the lived experiences of these returnees and the perspectives and realities of social workers supporting returnees, we aim to unravel the empirical disjuncture between the expectations of return migration, produced through dominant discourses, and the actual realities of migrants' post-return situations. By doing so, we want to shed a different light on the phenomenon of return migration and reintegration processes after return, compared to the narrow top-down interpretations which are often used in discourses of restrictive immigration policies. Finally, by improving the insight into the return and reintegration processes of this particular group of returnees, this study aims to enable social workers in various welfare settings in host countries and in countries of origin to be better equipped to support migrants who are considering returning, or have returned to their country of origin. Therefore, the study wishes to articulate some implications and recommendations for return policies and for practitioners supporting returnees.

1.7 Methodological framework of the study

In an effort to move beyond taken-for-granted or policy-driven notions of return migration we adopt an interpretative narrative approach and a multi-sited and longitudinal research design, which not only enables us to engage with lived experiences and meaning-making processes of returnees, but also to consider the elements impacting their return processes in both contextualized and dynamic ways. Furthermore, we explore the perspectives on AVRR support of different actors on several levels (the perspective of the host country, perspectives of social workers, perspectives of returnees) in order to enlarge the insight into the practice of assisted voluntary return and reintegration support. In the following paragraph, we elaborate on our focus on returnees' stories as lived experiences and illustrate how this methodology reflects the conceptualization of return migration as a situated concept. Next, we motive our choice for a multi-sited and longitudinal research design. Hereafter, we explain the design of the five research studies in detail.

1.7.1 Lived experiences of return

Our focus on returnees' stories enables to place the lived experiences, the meaning-making processes and the subjective dimension of returnees' lives in the centre of the research (Eastmond, 2007; Riessman & Quinney, 2005). We explore returnees' narratives about their return-decision, return process, and past and current living conditions, and focus on multiple meanings attributed to these experiences and events (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). We herein pay attention to how

returnees make sense of their experiences by located or relocated them into their returnees' personal biographies and seeking ways of going forward (Eastmond, 2007; Riessman & Quinney, 2005). Moreover, to understand people's narratives, "we must relate them to the social and political contexts that have shaped and continue shaping the circumstances of their lives and which engage their commitments" (Eastmond, 2007, p. 252). This allows a focus beyond the individual, hereby realizing a contextualized study of lived experiences.

Further, the focus on returnees' lived experiences allows a necessary inductive approach, in which the analytic attention is shifted to the subjective significance of different elements in returnees' post-return lives (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998), rather than to start from pre-defined domains of a successful return. Returnees' experiences can tell us something about how social actors make sense of their world (Eastmond, 2007), and therefore, analyses that focus on returnees as 'interpretative subjects' can make important empirical and theoretical contributions to the social scientific study of migration and returnees' every day lives (Halfacree, 2004; Silvey & Lawson, 1999; Willen, 2007).

This methodological approach joins Long and Oxfeld's (2004) conceptualization of return migration as a 'situated concept'. Return migration and return processes are framed in, and impacted by, particular contexts, events and experiences, and receive meaning from the returning individuals' experiences and points of view. This conceptualizing of return as a situated concept thus urges for a contextualized study of return migration. Therefore, we opt for a country-specific approach, and study the return and reintegration processes of migrants returning to two neighbouring countries Armenia and Georgia (for information on this study setting see 1.7.3.3). This allows the careful contextualization that is needed to make an in-depth exploration of post-return situations (Huttunen, 2010), and reduces the heterogeneity in terms of the returning country context (Black *et al*., 2004; Cassarino, 2014). Further, it demands a critical analysis of the policy context in which these returns take place. Therefore, the focus on the lived experiences of returnees and on the perspectives of social workers is complemented by a policy analysis of the evolutions in the Belgian AVR programme.

1.7.2 Multi-sited and longitudinal design

It is well-recognized nowadays that return migration should be conceptualized as a multi-phased, multi-layered, long-lasting and complex process and experience (Black *et al*., 2004; Ghanem, 2003; King, 2000; Markowitz & Stefansson, 2004; Ruben *et al*., 2009; Storti, 2011). Therefore, the insights in migrants' return processes benefit from a multi-sited and longitudinal research design. In multi-sited research, data are collected in different geographic localities. Multi-sited

research also allows to follow people's movement across spaces, and to get a deeper insight into the complexity of migration processes (Falzon, 2009; Marcus, 1995). Longitudinal qualitative research involves multiple interviews with the same individual at different moments throughout time, allowing to measure and explore patterns of change and continuity over time within individuals and the factors associated with these processes (Farrall, 2006; Saldaña, 2003).

Therefore, a multi-sited and longitudinal methodology enables a more holistic approach to return migration as it importantly captures different phases of migrants' return process (pre- and post-return) (Davids & Van Houte, 2008; Gualda & Escriva, 2014), and studies return migration as a multi-locational and ongoing process which can change considerably over time. A multi-sited, longitudinal approach allows overcoming several methodological limitations in current, mostly cross-sectional studies on return migration, whereby return migration is studied in one place and at one time, hereby excluding a necessary evolving perspective on return migration.

1.7.3 Research design

1.7.3.1 Study 1 – A preliminary case study of the perspectives of Nepali returnees on their return process

The first study (chapter 2) is a preliminary, multi-sited study, intended to provide a bottom-up insight into how returnees returning with AVRR support themselves evaluate the return process. For this purpose, cooperation with Caritas Belgium is established as a gateway to possible study participants, both before and after their return. The choice is made to focus on return to Nepal, because the number of returnees from Belgium to Nepal is relatively high (Fedasil, 2010a), and many Nepalese understand English, facilitating communication during this exploratory study. In the study, data is collected through the use of semi-structured qualitative interviews focusing on expectations of Nepalese candidate-returnees about their forthcoming return to the country of origin, and, after return, their evaluations of their past and current living situations. Five returnees are interviewed before their return in Belgium, of which four are interviewed a second time in Nepal. To enlarge the group of participants in this study, post-return interviews are conducted with 16 other Nepalese migrants who also returned with the support of Caritas Belgium. A qualitative thematic analysis is used to group the respondents' experiences chronologically along different phases of the migration cycle, and to gain insights in evolution and changes in their perspectives and the factors impacting their evaluations of their living situation.

1.7.3.2 Study 2- Policy analysis of developments in the Belgian AVR programme

A second study (chapter 3) aims to investigate the developments in the Belgian AVR programme over time (research question 1). For this policy analysis, a qualitative content analysis is conducted, based on an assessment of a range of documents on the Belgian AVR programme from its start in 1984 until 2013 (i.e., policy documents, policy notes, annual reports, and research reports). The resulting information is grouped around developments in three themes: programme content, target group, and institutional positioning, since these variables can capture the interpretation of and evolution in of the Belgian AVR programme.

1.7.3.3 Study 3 – A multi-sited and longitudinal follow-up of the return processes of Armenian and Georgian migrants returning with AVRR support

The third study forms the core of the PhD research and aims to study the lived experiences of migrants returning with AVRR support and their perspectives on their return processes, their past and current living conditions, their wellbeing and the received reintegration support. In a longitudinal and multi-sited study, the return processes of a group of Armenian and Georgian returnees is followed from the moment they make the decision to return with the Belgian AVRR programme until two years after their return. The data are collected through semi-structured interviews with the participants at three moments: before they returned, so while still being in Belgium, but when they already had decided to return (*measurement moment 1*); during the first year after their return to the country of origin (*measurement moment 2*); and during the second year after return (*measurement moment 3*). The interviews focus on returnees' migration motives and migration experiences, and respondents' personal evaluations of their current and past living situations, their wellbeing and the received support.

The study setting, the two neighbouring countries Armenia and Georgia, is chosen because a relatively high number of migrants residing in Belgium decide to return on a voluntarily basis to these two countries (IOM, 2010). Both countries are characterized by a high emigration rate, which has markedly intensified over recent decades (ETF, 2013; Gevorkyan, Marshuryan, & Gevorkyan, 2006; Hofmann & Buckley, 2012). Natural disasters, armed conflicts and the socio-political crisis after the collapse of the Soviet Union led to the departure of many Armenians and Georgians in the late 1990s (Badurashvili, 2004; Gevorkyan *et al*., 2006; Hofmann & Buckley, 2012). Currently, both countries are still recovering from the hard years following their independence, and a poor socio-economic situation, high poverty levels, unaffordable or unavailable healthcare, and unstable political

conditions still form important causes of emigration, mainly to Russia, but because of increasing discriminatory acts against migrants from Caucasus countries in Russia, also to Western Europe and elsewhere (Bakhshinyan, 2014; ETF, 2013; Falkingham, 2005; Ishkanian, 2002; Roman, 2002). For most migrants, migration to Russia is mainly temporary, while migration to Europe is often intended to be permanent, with emigrants taking their families with them (Bakhshinyan, 2014). The majority of the Armenians and Georgians who migrate to Europe ask for asylum, though asylum recognition rates are very low for asylum seekers from these countries, and most are thus not allowed to stay permanently (Bakhshinyan, 2014; EMN, 2009).

At European level, the overall number of assisted returns to Armenia from various host countries has been quite stable during the last decade, though the number of migrants returning to Georgia has fluctuated, with recent peaks of 1,157 returnees in 2013 (11th highest number of AVRR returns with IOM) and 1,874 returnees in 2014 (5th highest number of AVRR returns with IOM)(IOM, 2015a). In the period from 2000 to 2013, respectively 6,627 (21st place) and 7,352 (16th place) migrants returned from various European host countries to Armenia and Georgia, quite a high number given their small populations (respectively 2,976,566 and 4,476,900 in 2013 [World Bank, 2014]).

In line with the approach of the preliminary study, all Armenian and Georgian migrants who return through the Belgian AVRR programme with the support of Caritas Belgium within a certain period (January 2010 – May 2012) are asked to participate to the study. Eighty-five 'returning units' (representing a single migrant, a couple, or a family; Armenian nationality: n=50; Georgian nationality: n=35) agreed to participate before their departure. After the first interview in Belgium, the respondents are asked to reconfirm their willingness to continue the participation and be interviewed again within the first and second year after return. Seventy-nine returnees are interviewed within the first year after return, 65 within the second year.

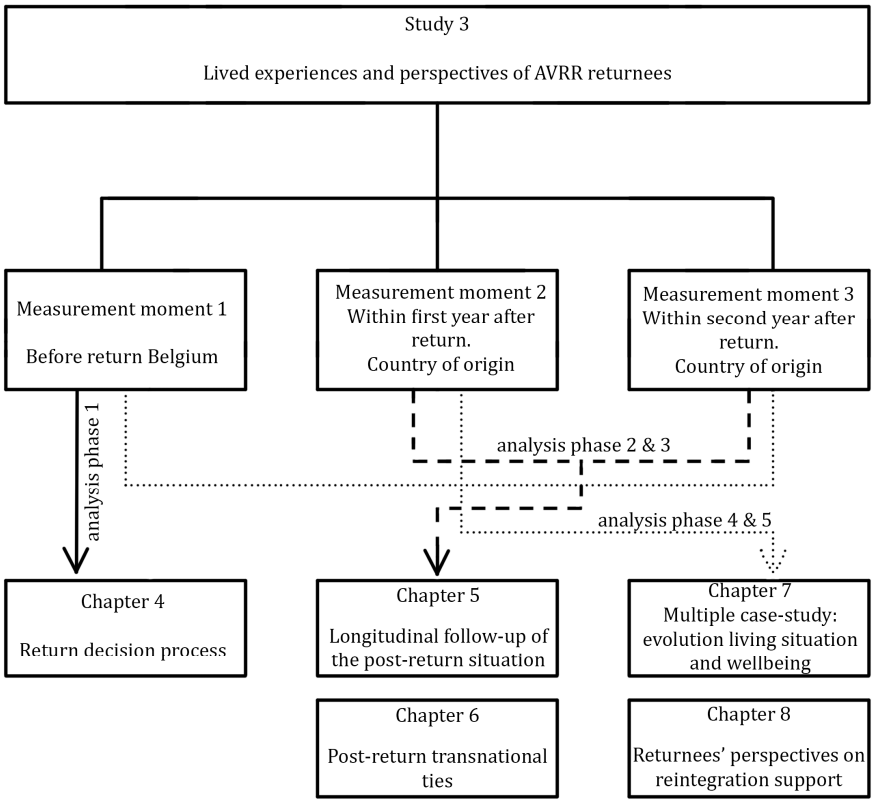
The *data analysis* of this study encompasses five phases, with each phase focusing on a specific data set (see figure 1.3) and aiming to answer a particular research question.

In *analysis phase 1* (chapter 4), the data of the interviews before return (measurement moment 1) are analysed thematically in order to gain insight into the respondents' return motives, lived experiences of voluntariness and living conditions before their departure from Belgium (research question 2).

In *analysis phase 2* (chapter 5), the data of the post-return interviews (measurement moment 2 and 3) are analysed in order to investigate returnees' return experiences and post-return situations during the initial two years after

their return, and possible changes in their wellbeing and personal evaluations of their livings conditions in this period (research question 3). In a first step, the data are analysed thematically in order to reveal the central themes emerging in returnees' post-return lives and the possible relationships between the themes. In a second step, the data are clustered into the three patterns that are described by the respondents: an improvement of their situation between measurement moment two and three, a decline, or no change. The data are then analysed by group in order to explore possible dynamics, changes and reasons for change.

Figure 1.3: Overview of measurement moments, analysis phases and chapters in study 3



Analysis phase 3 (chapter 6) addresses the same data set of post-return interviews, yet focuses on whether respondents' post-return lives contain a transnational dimension, and whether this impacts their post-return situations (research question 4). For this purpose, a qualitative content analysis is carried out to examine if the respondents refer to transnational ties with Belgium in their narratives about their post-return lives. Analytical distinctions are made between 'interpersonal ties' with a person in Belgium, 'institutional ties', including

interactions with Belgian institutions related to the state, the market and civil society, and 'symbolic ties' with their experiences in Belgium. Herein we focus on the content of the ties, their intensity and their specific meaning for the respondents and for their daily lives.

Analysis phase 4 (chapter 7) focuses on all interviews (measurement moments 1, 2 and 3) of four selected cases of Armenian returnees, in order to realize an in-depth exploration of how migrants experience their return trajectories and how their wellbeing is shaped throughout the return migration process (research question 5). Four cases are selected which provide a rich account of the return experiences, and who largely differ in their 'willingness to return'. A qualitative analysis using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method is applied to study respondents perspectives, attitudes and feelings about the return and their wellbeing and its evolution over time.

Finally, *analysis phase 5* (chapter 8) focuses on returnees' perspectives on the reintegration support (research question 6). We combine a content analysis of the assistance reports in which social workers document the planned reintegration support (before return) and the actual provided support (after return), with a thematic analysis of the data of the three measurement moments. This is done in order to explore the ways the reintegration support was implemented and evaluated by the respondents, and to discern possible contradictions or alignments between the AVRR programmes' features and the returnees' perspectives.

1.7.3.4 Study 4 – The perspectives of social workers

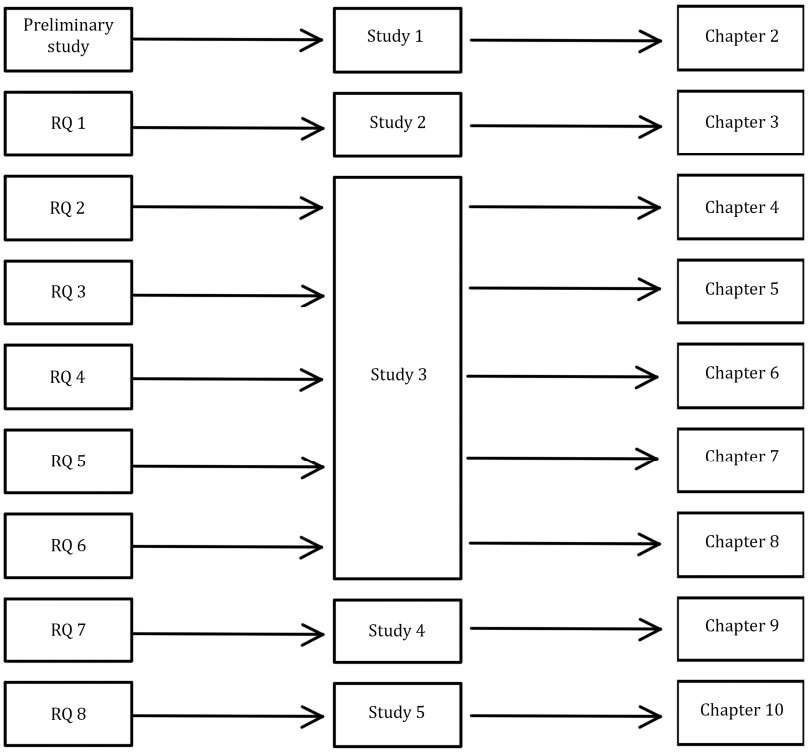
The fourth study (chapter 9) brings the perspectives of the social workers who provide the reintegration support in the country of origin into focus (research question 7). For this purpose, we conduct a semi-structured interview with two local social workers who implement the reintegration support to the 85 returnees in this study (50 Armenians and 35 Georgians). These data are analysed thematically in order to explore insights into social workers' perspectives on return migration and reintegration support and their role therein.

1.7.3.5 Study 5 – Counter-case: the perspectives of migrants in detention

As a counter-case to our study of the perspectives of returnees within assisted voluntary return programmes, study five (chapter 10) aims to investigate the perspectives of migrants in detention centres on their upcoming forced return to the country of origin (research question 8). Semi-structured interviews are conducted with Armenian (n=18) and Georgian (n=13) migrants who are detained in four different Belgian detention centres, focusing on respondents' migration

stories, their lives in Belgium and their perspectives on detention and return. A thematic analysis is conducted to reveal the central themes in the respondents' perspectives.

Figure 1.4: Overview of the research design



1.7.4 Ethical considerations

Several ethical principles guided the study. First, all interviews were conducted under conditions of confidentiality and anonymity. Attention was given to inform each respondent about the study' aims and conditions, and to stress that they were free to end their participation at any moment and that they could choose not to answer on particular questions. Further, during the interviews with the migrants, we stressed the interviewer's independence from migration authorities, including that their participation in the study would not influence (negatively or positively) their immigration case (in the case of study 5 with migrants in detention) or impact (decrease or increase) the support they were receiving (in the case of migrants returning with AVRR support in study 1 and study 3), in order to prevent the creation of unrealistic expectations of the research (Leaning,

2001) or distrust towards the researcher (Black *et al*., 2006). Only after receiving the interviewees' oral informed consent, the interview started and, when consented to, was audiotaped. The choice was made to work with an oral informed consent (Gordon, 2003), since the request to sign an 'official form' often creates suspicion, about the true anonymous nature of the participation, or, because it can relate to negative experiences with 'officials' in country of origin or during the immigration trajectory (Gordon, 2003; Liamputtong, 2008).

In the longitudinal study, the respondents were asked to reconfirm their willingness to continue their participation after the first and second interview, in order to obtain and maintain informed consent during the longitudinal follow-up (Hugman, Bartolomei, & Pittaway, 2011). After the first interview, the respondents were asked to provide the researcher with an address and phone number in order to be contacted again after return. Also the contact information of the researcher was given, to enable the respondent to contact the researcher as well. Within the first and second year after return, the respondents were contacted by telephone to plan the second and third interview. Due to language barriers and practical challenges to trace the respondents after their return to the country of origin (e.g., since several respondents changed their mobile phone number), it was the social worker who contacted the respondents by phone to plan the meeting between the researcher and the respondent.

However, we were confronted with several ethical challenges during the research. First, we acknowledge that our interviews with detainees and migrants returning with AVRR support might have revived hard feelings related to earlier interview experiences in the course of respondents' immigration trajectory, (Klein & Williams, 2012). To minimize this risk, we never focused on precise legal facts, but primarily on migrants' own lived experiences, and participants could also decline any question they do not feel comfortable with. Still, we recognize that 'doing no harm' in this context, as in similar research contexts, is difficult to anticipate or control (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003; Leaning, 2001). It seemed extremely important therefore to act as an 'ethical researcher' (Vandekinderen, Roets, & Van Hove, 2014), meaning that the researcher sometimes reacted to appeals from respondents (Mackenzie, McDowell, & Pittaway, 2007; Vervliet *et al*., 2015), when this action might in some way make a difference to their wellbeing (Leaning, 2001). Concretely, in the case of study 5 in the detention centres, this involved, when invoked, that we passed respondents' worries or need for information to social workers in the detention centre or offered help when possible (see chapter 10). In the case of study 1 and 3 with migrants returning with AVRR support, this meant that we informed, with the consent of the participant, his/her social worker about difficulties and struggles. We also gave information to the participants ourselves (mainly about the legal consequences of their return through AVRR, and

the future possibilities to return to Belgium) or created contacts with people or institutions in Belgium when participants desired or needed this (e.g., to obtain a birth certificate of the Belgian municipality needed to subscribe a child for kindergarten). However, we could not react to each appeal, and we declined requests when this created expectations that would not be able to sustain on a longer term, or when in se, the action was impossible to take for all participants (Vervliet *et al*., 2015).

A second ethical challenge is the function of the social workers in the country of origin as important 'gate keepers' to the research field. In this research project, the social workers in the country of origin facilitated the contacts between researcher and respondents after their return. This approach considerable increased our success of realizing a longitudinal follow-up of the returnees, yet we were well aware of the existing power relation between the social workers and the respondents (Hopkins, 2010). As the social worker was the person who provided, or had provided, reintegration support to the respondents, their participation to the research could be induced by their hope to receive additional support or by feelings of loyalty or gratitude towards the social workers (Hughman *et al*., 2011). Furthermore, the social worker was often present during the interview, and in some cases, took the role of interpreter. Although the use of an interpreter and the specific profile of the interpreter always influence the research data (Edwards, 1998; Jacobsen & Landau, 2003), this influence might be enlarged when translations were done by the social worker who had a professional relationship with the respondent. However, at the same time, the social worker's presence and his/her trustful relationship with the respondent, also facilitated the trust and cooperation in the participant-researcher relationship (Edwards, 1998; Vervliet *et al*., 2015). In a similar vein, also the positionality of the researcher, as a young, female, Belgian researcher, closely connected to Caritas Belgium, may have influenced the interviewer-respondent relationship and the respondents answers (Hugman *et al.,* 2011). For the respondents, the visits of the Belgian researcher, and the narration of their story to the researcher could revive hope to receive additional support or to attract public and/or policy attention to their difficult living conditions after their return from Belgium (Black *et al*., 2006; Silove, Steel, & Watters, 2000). This might have evoked them to presenting a more negative picture of their post-return situation. In contrast, feelings of loyalty evoked by the support they received 'from Belgium' or 'from Caritas' may have prevented the respondents to express (particular) critiques they had about the programme to the researcher. Further, the Belgian nationality of the researcher might have influenced respondents' answers relating to the reasons for their migration and return, for example whether to narrate the same stories as they already told throughout their migration trajectory, and might

also have influenced the answers about their views on Belgium and their transnational ties with the host country (chapter 6).

To minimize these constraints, we explicitly stressed that the interview would not influence the support they were receiving, we underlined our interest in their personal opinions about and experiences of (positive or negative) elements of the AVRR support, and applied the above mentioned iterative informed consent (Hugman *et al.,* 2011; Mackenzie *et al*., 2007). Moreover, our longitudinal follow-up of the respondents, which included several interviews over a long period, enhanced the relationship of trust between the respondents and the researcher, which created an atmosphere of openness in expressing opinions and views (Vervliet *et al*., 2015). However, following Edwards (1998), we believe it is impossible to totally erase the potential influence of interpreter's and/or interviewer's profiles, and therefore, one should not try to make them 'invisible', but encompass a reflexive evaluation of these aspects when analysing the data. To that end, questions and answers were re-translated afterwards when hesitations or emotions were noticed in the interpreter, interviewer or respondent during the interview. Furthermore, we tried to make this impact visible during the data analysis and reporting.

1.7.5 Overview of the chapters

Chapter 2 reports on the perspectives of Nepali returnees on their return with the AVRR programme (study 1). This is a preliminary study that aims to explore the experiences of return migration from the perspectives of migrants themselves, and to build a methodological base to support the further study design.

Chapter 3 describes the historical developments of the Belgian AVR programme and the changes in the programme's goals over time. It gives a view of the context of the Belgian AVR programme and return policy (study 2).

Chapter 4 reports on the return decision processes, living conditions and voluntariness of the return of migrants, before their departure from the host country (first part of study 3).

Chapter 5 presents a longitudinal follow-up of the post-return situations of returnees during the initial two years after their return (second part of study 3).

Chapter 6 describes returnees' post-return situations from a transnational perspective (third part of study 3).

Chapter 7 reports on an in-depth longitudinal study of the return processes and the changes in returnees' evaluations of the return processes and of their wellbeing, based on a multiple case study of four Armenian respondents (fourth part of study 3).

Chapter 8 elaborates on the implementation of reintegration support, and the perspectives of returnees on the reintegration support they received through different moments of their return processes (fifth part of study 3).

Chapter 9 focuses on the perspectives of social workers in the country of origin on the reintegration support they provide to returnees (study 4).

Chapter 10 addresses the perspectives of migrants in detention centres (study 5).

Finally, chapter 11 presents the main findings of these five studies, the contribution of the research project to academic discussions on return migration, the implications of this research for voluntary return policy and support practices, the limitations of the research, and possible implications for further research.

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2
Returnees' perspectives on their re-migration processes*

*Based on Lietaert, I., Derluyn, I., & Broekaert, E. (2014). Returnees' perspectives on their re-migration processes. *International Migration*, *52*(5), 144 – 158.

Abstract

The return of refugees and migrants back to their country of origin is an important topic on the agenda of West-European governments, as return is considered as the most 'durable solution' for the 'refugee problem', and as an instrument with which to tackle 'illegal' migration. However, these migration policies generally lack a clear evidence base, as little studies have focused on returnees' current living situations and on their perspectives on the re-migration process. In this paper we therefore try to listen to returnees' voices, through in-depth interviews with four Nepali migrants both before (in Belgium) and after (in Nepal) their return, and with 16 returnees after their return to Nepal. The interviews show how most returnees start with a disadvantageous 'point of departure' to realize a 'successful' return: they mostly do not really depart 'voluntarily', and they only dispose of limited possibilities to prepare their return and set realistic expectations. But also back in the 'home country', most returnees judge their current economic, social and political living situation as bad, meeting little of the expectations they've set before they returned. The participants consider the support they received through the NGO's returning programmes as minimal, because they are mostly limited to a small amount of financial support, and thus of little significance in these returnees' efforts to rebuild their lives in their 'home' country. If return programmes want to make a difference in returnees' lives, they should have two extensive components in the 'home' and the 'host' country, incorporating in both components an integral approach, including economic, political, social and psychological aspects. Viewing these findings, it is not surprising that most interviewees eventually evaluate their return as unsuccessful, and many returnees consider re-emigration, all of which clearly questions the current basis of worldwide migration policies.

2.1 Introduction

The return of refugees[1] and migrants from the host country back to their country of origin has become an important topic on the agenda of West-European governments (Black & Gent, 2006; Van Houte & De Koning, 2008; see also table 2.1), since return – and especially 'voluntary' return – is often considered as the most 'durable solution' for the 'refugee problem', and as an instrument with which to tackle 'illegal' migration (Black & Gent, 2006; Black & Koser, 1999; Commers & Blommaert, 2001; IOM, 2004; UNHCR, 2008). As people are thought to belong to a certain place, returning 'home' after migration is viewed as a 'natural' phenomenon, as the best and right thing to do (Hammond, 1999). By returning, the migration cycle seems to be completed, and refugees are thought to be morally, spiritually, culturally and economically better off. However, the situation in the home country has often changed considerably during their absence, and the 'home' country is no longer experienced as 'home' (Black & Koser, 1999; D'Onofrio, 2004; Hammond, 1999).

Despite the preponderance of return in migration policies, little is known about returnees' experiences and how they manage to build up their lives after return (Black & Gent, 2006; Black & Koser, 1999; Newman, 2003; Van Houte & De Koning, 2008), also questioning the evidence basis of governmental discourses on return programmes (Hammond, 1999; Newman, 2003).

Current evidence shows how returnees' 'new life' (in an 'old context') often turns out to be difficult: their economic situation is often more deplorable than before they migrated, access to housing and work is reduced, many live below the poverty line, doing worse than the average population, and do not succeed in realising a sustainable livelihood (Black *et al.*, 2004; Home Office, 2005; IOM, 2002; Van Houte & Davids, 2008). Psychologically, emotional problems due to difficult migration experiences render it difficult to cope with economic adversity (IOM, 2002; Van Houte & Davids, 2008) and, socially, returnees can rely on their social network for emotional support, but that limited social network cannot provide sufficient material support (Van Houte & Davids, 2008). Generally, these studies seem to generate the conclusion that returnees are not that well embedded in the 'home' society to which they have returned and, overall, experience an instable living situation, with high percentages of returnees (76 - 81%) wanting to re-emigrate (IOM, 2002; Ruben, Van Houte, & Davids, 2009; Van Houte & Davids, 2008).

Table 2.1: The numbers of returnees in the assisted voluntary return programme of the International Organization for Migration in different European host countries (January – March 2009)

Country	Total number of returnees in the IOM assisted voluntary return programme	Number of returnees receiving extra reintegration support in the country of origin
Austria	282	35
Belgium	710	105
Denmark	9	9
Finland	12	0
France	60	0
Germany	646	0
Hungary	102	8
Ireland	154	148
Latvia	1	0
Lithuania	0	0
Netherlands	706	368
Norway	273	101
Portugal	68	0
Sweden	12	347
Switzerland	126	172
United Kingdom	1222	549
Total	**4383**	**1842**

Source IOM (2009)

These findings strongly question the return programmes' 'sustainability', and thus their effectiveness, as 'sustainability' is often considered as the golden standard by which to evaluate return programmes. However, government discourses mostly interpret 'sustainable return' as 'absence of re-emigration' (also because of its attraction for sending states focusing on the successful removal of unwanted migrants) (DRC, 2005; Van Houte & De Koning, 2008), while it's obvious that 'sustainable return' involves many more aspects (DRC, 2003; Van Houte & De Koning, 2008). According to Black and colleagues (2004), different perspectives (returnees' subjective perception, objective measurements of their situation, and community-level views) on multiple levels (the physical, socio-economic and political levels) must be included when conceptualizing sustainable return. Based on interviews with returnees, they define return migration as sustainable "if returnees' socio-economic status and fear of violence or persecution is no worse, relative to the population in the place of origin, one year after their return" (Black *et al*., 2004, p. 39). Besides the influence of the educational and economic situation in the host country, Black and colleagues (2004) also assign two other variables

that possibly affect the sustainability of return: voluntariness of return and reintegration assistance.

'Voluntariness of return' is strongly influenced by the complex operationalization of the concept 'voluntary'. Although seldom explored in government discourses, defining 'voluntary' return – as opposite to 'involuntary' or 'forced' return (IOM, 2004) – is complex, as different levels of voluntariness can be involved: (1) a clear and open choice either to return to the home country or to stay permanently in the host society; (2) a choice between returning now voluntarily, or remaining in the host country, running the risk of an involuntary repatriation later; or (3) an absence of force, as the returnee does not raise any objections to removal (Morrison, 2000 as cited in Black *et al*., 2004). Although non-governmental organizations (NGOs) dealing with voluntary return support the first interpretation of the concept 'voluntary' (Black *et al*., 2004), practice shows how many European return programmes do not reach this standard (Black, 2002), although they are labelled as such because of political and economic reasons (Black & Gent, 2006; Hammond, 1999; IOM; 2004; Noll, 1999). How can we speak about voluntary return when one has no other plausible, legal alternative; or one has to face the threat of sanctions or force, even without actual implementation (Ghosh, 2000; Noll, 1999; Van Houte & De Koning, 2008)? A failed asylum applicant, returning because there is no hope left of obtaining a residence permit, often does not return out of a personal desire. The use of 'objective' standards to determine when someone can or should return excludes a real 'voluntary' choice on the part of refugees whether or not to return (Chimni, 2004), and thus might limit a successful return experience.

Another factor that affects return sustainability, according to Black and colleagues (2004), is the availability of support programmes for returnees, although knowledge about their effectiveness is still limited (Black *et al*., 2004; Van Houte & De Koning, 2008). The study by Van Houte and Davids (2008) shows how many returnees are disappointed, as the situation in their home country does not meet the expectations created by the NGOs supporting the returnees. Moreover, the support provided by these NGOs is merely financial, which is barely supervised, and is often used for other purposes that do not lead to sustainable living situations. On the other hand, supporting returnees in starting up an own business has more positive outcomes, because this support combines financial and personal support. Other forms of support, such as information supply, support in job finding and psychosocial counselling, are often not provided, although they are much needed by the returnees. In the United Kingdom, an evaluation made by the Home Office (2005) states how reintegration processes of returnees can be maximized through higher amounts of money per returnee and through support in job finding. However, Ruben and colleagues (2009) and Van Houte and De

Koning (2008) conclude that the influence of supporting programmes on returnees' embeddedness is limited, compared to the influence of both individual characteristics and migration experiences. This comes about partly because the potential positive effects of supporting programmes are not fully utilized, and important dimensions of embeddedness, such as social networks, are too often neglected in support programmes.

The contrast between an overall positive picture of return as elaborated in governments' discourses and the (albeit limited) evidence about the returnees' difficult current living situations and experiences is striking, questioning the evidence base of governments' return policies, and illustrating how the experiences of returnees themselves remain completely lacking in government discourses as well as in return programmes (Hammond, 1999; Koser, 2000; Newman, 2003).

Therefore, in this paper we aim to give a voice to refugees who have returned to their 'home' country, by listening to their expectations about their forthcoming return to the country of origin and, after their arrival 'back home', their evaluations of their past and current living situations. Therefore, in this paper we provide a unique, bottom-up insight into how returnees themselves evaluate their (voluntary?) decision to return.

2.2 Methods

2.2.1 The study setting and participants

We chose to limit the research to one country of origin (Nepal) and one host country (Belgium), as conditions in the country of origin and migration experiences both seem to impact the experience and success of return importantly (DRC, 2005; Ruben *et al*., 2009; Van Houte & De Koning, 2008). Nepal was chosen as the country of origin because the number of returnees from Belgium to Nepal is relatively high (ninth place out of 93 return countries),[2] and many Nepalese understand English, facilitating communication during the research.

At first, we chose to interview Nepalese migrants still living in Belgium, but wanting to return to Nepal with the assistance of the return and reintegration programme funded by the Belgian government. The criteria for entering this return programme and its budget are determined by the government, but the programme itself is implemented through two organizations, the International Organization for Migration and the Belgian NGO Caritas International, both of which use their international network of local partners in different countries to support the returnees (Fedasil, 2009). In this study, we cooperated with Caritas

International as a gateway to possible study participants, both in Belgium and in Nepal (this latter through Caritas International's local partner in Nepal) but, as researchers, we remained totally independent from Caritas International, both in the study design, sampling methods and data analyses, and in the writing of the report.

We opted to interview the returnees twice, both before (in Belgium) and after (in Nepal) their return, as this method allows to achieve a more overall picture of the return process and to compare the returnees' expectations before their departure with the reality 'back home' (Black *et al*., 2004; Van Houte & Davids, 2008). We selected the respondents through purposive sampling (Neuman, 2006): we interviewed all of the Nepalese returnee candidates (n = 5) who presented themselves for the return and reintegration programme of Caritas International within the research period (September 2008 to January 2009). We informed each respondent about the study's content and objectives, and asked them to sign an informed consent form. When we had secured their permission, we recorded the conversation. After the interview, we asked all of the respondents whether we could interview them again after their return, and none refused. However, we only could interview four of them, as one participant lived too far from the central cities in Nepal where we conducted the interviews after return.

Second, to enlarge the group of participants in this study, we interviewed Nepalese migrants (n = 16) who had returned to Nepal in 2007 or 2008 with the support of Caritas International. The selection of the respondents was carried out by Caritas International's local partner in Kathmandu, on the basis of the following criteria: (1) the possibility of tracing participants back; (2) the possibility for participants to come to a central point; and (3) people's willingness to participate in the study. Out of the 29 selected respondents, nine did not answer when contacted, two emigrated again, and two lived too far away to come to one of the central venues. We carried out the interviews in three Nepalese cities (Kathmandu, Chitwan and Pokhara). In this part of the study also, we informed each respondent about the study's content and its objectives, and asked them to sign an informed consent form: we again recorded the conversation when we had secured their permission.

All 21 study participants were men, with an average age of 39.7 years (SD = 7.72, range 30– 54). Seventeen of them were married, but their wife and children had not migrated with them to Belgium, and one person was unmarried. Three interviewees migrated together with their family: one family with two children of school age, one family with a 1-year-old child born in Belgium, and one couple without children.

2.2.2 Data collection and analysis

Through the use of semi-structured qualitative interviews, we asked the return candidates in Belgium about their situation before and their reason for departure from Nepal, their current living situation in Belgium and their decision to return (their reasons, preparation and contact with the supporting organization). In the interviews with the respondents after their return to Nepal, we added questions about their current living situation in Nepal and the realization of their expectations about the return and the assistance. Although it sometimes constrained communication, we chose to not use an interpreter, in order to emphasize our independent position and to avoid, as much as possible, social desirability in the respondents' answers.

We transcribed all of the interviews literally and analysed them with the support of WinMAX98 (Kuckartz, 1998), a code-and-retrieve software programme that allows easy encoding, organizing and location of data (Neuman, 2006).

2.3 Migration cycle

2.3.1 Longing for change (1) – The decision to leave Nepal

Before their migration to Belgium, the interviewed migrants were primarily higher-educated people, with a relatively stable, well-earning job status in Nepal (table 2.2). Therefore – except for one respondent – economic reasons were not the principal push factor to leave Nepal: most migrants decided to migrate because of the 'people's war', the civil war declared in 1996 by the Communist Party of Nepal (Amnesty International, 2002). Some escaped the violence and the generally dangerous living conditions, while others were personally faced with violence, being forced to give donations, accused of murder, forced to join the armed forces, or imprisoned and tortured:

> "I was active in politics and at a certain point I changed my opinion towards an attitude against the Maoist rebellion. Therefore Maoist partisans found me, beat me and I got imprisoned. Once in prison, I have been tortured, the tracks are still visible in my face. Immediately after I found my freedom again, I escaped to Belgium and asked for political asylum.

Table 2.2: An overview of migrants' appraisal of their living conditions before their migration to Belgium and before their return to their country of origin

	Total group (n = 21)	**Group questioned before and after return (n = 4)**	**Group only questioned after return (n = 16)**
Living situation in Nepal before migration			
Job			
Own business	12	1	10
Employee	7	3	4
Agriculture	1	-	1
Politics	1	-	1
Education			
None	2	-	2
Secondary school	4	-	4
High school/university	8	3	4
Unknown	7	1	6
Living situation in Belgium			
Time spent living in Belgium (months)*	48.40 (27.40; 14-102)	57.00 (26.61; 36-96)	44.06 (27.12; 14-102)
Time spent working in Belgium (months)*	13.61 (12.17; 0-36)	18.67 (18.04; 0-36)	13.50 (11.11; 0-36)
Legal status			
Asylum application rejected	19	4	14
Expired student visa	1	-	1
Ongoing procedure	1	-	1
Reintegration plans			
Investment in business	8	1	6
Investment in housing	5	-	5
Investment in housing and business	1	-	1
Start a new business	7	3	4

*The mean, followed by the SD and the range in parentheses.

Few respondents had set specific aims that they wanted to achieve by means of their migration – their primary intention was to secure their life:

> "I just left. I did not make any plans, just flee. It was a very dangerous period; nobody knew what I had to do. It is the same like a mouse. When you lock him into a room, he will find himself a safe place.

2.3.2 No change? (1) – The living situation in Belgium

Living in Belgium and finding security – as aimed for before their departure – was transformed, bit by bit, into the aims of obtaining legal documents in order to stay in Belgium and earning a good livelihood, the latter because finding a job was not

only important for survival, but also to be able to integrate in Belgium and to support family back home. However, most of the respondents did not succeed in any of these objectives: all of their asylum applications – except for two – were rejected, and finding a job was difficult, as most only found legal work during short periods, often clashing with their own expectations and those of their family and community (table 2.2). Many respondents therefore considered their life in Belgium quite good as long as they could either work or receive social support. Six respondents explicitly illustrated how life in Belgium without a residence permit was extremely difficult and hard, especially because of the continuing fear of being arrested or deported, the uncertainty and the endless 'waiting':

> When you have a positive decision, life is good. But when you have a negative decision, a dog has a better life. I did not like that, it is very hard.

2.3.3 Longing for change (2) – The decision to return back home

Reasons to return 'back home' were thus, for more than half of the respondents, related to their living conditions in Belgium, and more specifically to the fact that they had to survive without a legal residence permit after the final rejection of their asylum application:

> I have been a long time in Belgium. Eight years, in that way, my young life is damaged. My case is still running here, but I cannot wait anymore, it is a frustrating life.

This clearly questions the 'voluntariness' – in its most genuine sense – of the decision to return (Morrison, 2000 as cited in Black *et al*., 2004) (and thus also the labelling of most NGO programmes as 'voluntary return programmes'), as for the migrants, the absence of other legal alternatives made returning the only option left. This became also clear in the interviews carried out in Belgium with the Nepalese migrants planning to return to Nepal: two of them stated that their decision to leave was irreversible, but the other three indicated that, if they could still receive a residence permit, they would stay:

> If you have a social security, it is a normal life. If you don't and you don't have health assurance, you don't have a house, then, I don't die, but it is like dying. No, I did not die, but I am like a dead. Without life!

Additional pull factors in the decision to return were their families wishing them to return and the improved political situation in Nepal. Three respondents even related their decision to return directly to their reason to flee: once the political

situation in Nepal seemed to have improved, they wanted to return as soon as possible.

Most respondents made their own decision to return, although they considered the advice of friends in Belgium or family in Nepal. The five participants interviewed before they left Belgium told us how they had obtained information about the current situation in Nepal through the Internet, television, family and friends. None of these people had received useful information from an organization or spoke to a returnee, although some knew returned migrants personally. Creating a realistic image of their life after return was therefore not that easy:

> “ I don’t know how it is in Nepal now. I was eight years in Belgium, I was away for a very long time. It is not my life there anymore … I cannot recognize the situation in Nepal anymore, I cannot recognize the people there anymore.

Therefore, ideas about the political situation in Nepal for these five migrants differed considerably: some were convinced that the political situation had not changed much and still feared for their lives, one thought it still would be worse, and two saw positive changes in Nepal. After all, only one of the respondents had a clear picture of Nepal and knew what he would do after his return.

For all of the interviewees, the decision to return was taken quite rapidly, and most returnees only contacted the NGO organizing the return programme.

2.3.4 No change or even worse? (2) – Back ‘home’ in Nepal

Most respondents, except for the three who were positive overall, found no improvements in the current situation in Nepal compared to the situation when they left: although even little things had improved, many problems were still left, such as continuing fighting, insecurity, kidnapping, danger, and political and economic problems (table 2.3).

> “ The human rights are better than before, than during the King system. But it is not like other countries. The biggest problem is that there is no constitution and without constitution, they can do anything. Sometimes murder, corruption, rape, everything. Yesterday after my house, the mafia, they came and took everything! The TV, the animals, … things happen like that every day. So I have four dogs in my house to protect my property. Because of that, they don’t enter my house. There are so many problems, there is no protection.

Table 2.3: An overview of migrants' appraisal of their living conditions after their return to their country of origin

	Participants interviewed before and after return (n = 4)	**Participants only interviewed after return (n = 16)**
Living situation in Nepal after return		
Time back in Nepal (months)*	1.88 (1.03; 0.5-3)	8.88 (3.76; 1-12)
General situation in Nepal		
Improved	1	2
Little improvement, but still problems	2	9
No improvement, still dangerous	1	5
Largest difficulty		
Economic situation (lack of jobs)	1	6
No finances to restart	1	4
Political situation	1	2
No major problems	-	2
Unknown	1	2
Most needed to rebuild life		
Employment	2	3
Loan	1	3
Stable political situation	1	5
Unknown	-	5
Return experienced as success?		
Yes	1	2
Hopes	-	3
Doubts	1	1
No	1	8
Unknown	1	2
Desire to leave again?		
Yes/considering/if possible	1	10
If problems restart	1	1
No	2	2
Unknown	-	3

	Participants interviewed before and after return (n = 4)	Participants only interviewed after return (n = 16)
Return Assistance		
Assistance received in Belgium		
Good, no remarks	1	4
Amount to small	2	2
Pleased with help but amount to small	1	7
More help needed then only financial	-	2
Unknown	-	1
Suggestions for improvement		
Only lager amount	1	3
Possibility to loan	-	12
More guidance/counselling	2	1
Unknown	1	-
Assistance received in Nepal		
Pleased	-	4
Disappointed (only money, nothing else)	1	5
Contact problems (far away, papers)	-	2
Not yet received	1	-
Unknown	2	5

* The mean, followed by the SD and the range in parentheses.

Two respondents indicated how they were now able to identify existing problems more easily, because they could compare the Nepalese situation with life in Belgium.

Most respondents were also not positive about their own living conditions after return, especially with regard to their safety and their financial situation. As a consequence, seven respondents moved from the countryside to a larger city, forcing them to spend money on renting a house. As was the case during their stay in Belgium, back home too, more than half of the respondents had experienced significant difficulties in finding a job or start a business. Twelve of the 20 respondents planned to use the money from the reintegration fund to start up an own business in Nepal, but only seven of these actually did and only two of them were satisfied with their shop:

> “ I made a big plan. I have an orange garden in my village and I made a big proposal to build out the water supply for my garden but Caritas told me that they could give me only 700 euro. So we took 700 euro and I used the money for maintaining my house, and then it was finished.

Several interviewees told us how they were just managing to survive, and nothing more:

> Still, I don't think I will succeed to rebuild my life. I don't have hope. Someday, I am thinking: I am going to do it like that, the next day I am thinking something else. Day by day, I am only thinking things like that. The problem is: one, I have no idea and second, if you have an idea, you don't have money to do it.

Parallel to their stay in Belgium, and also back home, it was extremely difficult to realize the dreams and expectations with which they migrated. Only two out of nine respondents who came to Nepal with specific expectations regarding their future living situation actually judged their situation as meeting these expectations. Delusions related mostly to their economic situation and the amount of social support received:

> It is really different, really different. You know, when I was in Belgium, I thought, I go back to Nepal, I advertise for a house to rent, people will call me, I will go look to it, I will have a choice. And my friends will help me, I thought so. But when I came back, no friends are in my thoughts. I feel really a child, I feel mentally a child. If I don't know anybody, how can I ask, hallo, let me know something about the situation.

According to one respondent, your state of mind depends on what you expected from Nepal:

> Nepal is dirty, the social, economic and political situation is in this way, this is the way Nepal is. If they think that in Belgium when they return, it is no problem. If they think about Europe: "oh, it is very beautiful, it is very clean and all the facilities are here", and they expect those things in Nepal, they cannot stay here.

Regarding their emotional wellbeing, only two returnees felt satisfied with their new life, while most returnees were rather negative, mentioning feelings of depression, severe worries and loss of friends:

> You know, my friends, my colleagues are now at the director level, the manager level, policy high level, … only me … that is why my mind is too much depressed. So I don't have contact with them because I don't want to. All my friends are at high levels and I am in the street, that is very…

The loss of their social networks and personally having changed importantly during their absence were indicated as reasons why fitting 'back' in this 'old' context is rather difficult.

In contrast with the returnees' feelings, their family members were generally rather pleased with their return. Relatives' negative reactions mostly related to the lack of safety back home and the returnees' failure in meeting the set expectations, such as earning money and obtaining a residence permit. This negative appraisal of the return process by family members can increase the likelihood that the return is considered a failure, an 'unsuccessful migration' (IOM, 2002; Rentmeester, 2008; Van Houte & Davids, 2008):

> People think that I earned money and that I am high education and have big experience, but I didn't. The reality is very different. I don't tell them about my condition. They have a wrong image of me. They think that the persons who lived in Europe are very rich. But I want to tell them, it depends on the situation.

2.3.5 Changing perspectives before and after return

The interviews with four migrants both before and after their return back to Nepal give us a unique insight into the migration return process. One of the most striking elements here is the finding that, after their return to Nepal, the returnees' image of their life in Belgium completely changed. One participant, for example, related during the interview in Belgium how he considered life in Belgium without having a residence permit as totally inhumane, as 'dying'. During the interview in Nepal, however, he said how he found life in Belgium, even without papers, still better than in Nepal. His view on return had also changed completely: in Belgium, returning seemed the right thing to do because he had no future there; but having come back, he strongly regretted his decision. Three respondents found that they had judged the Nepalese situation correctly before leaving Belgium, while one thought that life was worse than he had imagined and that Nepal had not changed at all. Moreover, and in contrast to his expectations, he felt unsafe in Kathmandu. Those leaving for Nepal without any concrete plans now found it, being in Nepal, rather difficult to make plans, while the migrant returning with a positive image of Nepal and a clear plan was satisfied with his return and said he had made the right choice.

2.3.6 Longing for change (3) – The decision to migrate again?

Six respondents considered their return more or less as a success, ranging from an overall positive score to still hoping that everything would turn out well. All of the

other returnees were rather to very negative about the success of their return process; some had even given up hope, not knowing what to do with their future:

> “ If I had known how the situation was here in Nepal, really, I would not have come back.

Asked about the advice that they would give to other Nepalese in Belgium, most said that they would suggest that they stayed in Belgium: six of these people judged life in Belgium simply as better, even without papers, while five did so on the precondition of having a permanent residence permit, as they still considered return preferable to a life without legal documents. Four returnees would in any case advise their countrymen to return, and one respondent found that the decision to return should depend upon the returnee's plans in Nepal: a farmer could easily return, but a person who wanted to start up a business should be aware of the very difficult economic situation in Nepal.

Finally, only a minority of the interviewees were convinced that they would never want to leave their home country again; all the other returnees would like to migrate again, most of them back to Belgium. This clearly lends support to the idea that migration should be considered more and more as an ongoing cycle of spatial mobility (Eastmond, 2006). Return migration – certainly for those who are returning 'involuntarily' (in its broadest sense) – is in these cases only one phase in an ongoing migration process (Ruben *et al*., 2009).

2.4 Supporting returnees as challenge for return programmes

Returning 'home', after a (successful or less successful) period of migration, confronts returnees with important challenges, as illustrated. Many governments therefore finance return programmes, carried out by intergovernmental organizations or NGOs aiming to support returnees in the reintegration process in their home country. We asked the participants in this study to evaluate this support.

Overall, returnees prepared for their return minimally; most migrants only contacted the organization in charge of return programmes. However, for most returnees, the support given – or promised – meant an additional pull factor to proceed with the return process, at least because they could not afford the flight tickets themselves.

Returnees intended to use the financial support given by the return programme when back in the home country to create economic opportunities (e.g., starting an own shop) or to ameliorate their living conditions (e.g., house renovation),

although all of them considered the amount given as categorically too small for these plans to be realized successfully:

> “ But the business is not good. 700 euro is nothing, nothing can happen, only the decoration.

Interviewees therefore argued for higher financial support, possibly through the granting of a low-interest loan, together with specific feedback on the goals they had set for their return and more information about the current situation in the home country (Arowolo, 2000; Ghosh, 2000; Van Houte & De Koning, 2008: see also table 2.3):

> “ It is not enough. We need much more support, and the way to some kind of loan system. We should be able to rebuild life from inside some kind of home, factory or system. They should show the way. When returnees want to find a job, or a private company or join some company, they should tell: you can go to this kind of office. If you need a loan, you can go there. Day by day, day by day, rebuilding life, like that.

> “ … [the NGO supporting the returnees] should give better counselling, they have to say to the people: “This is the situation in Nepal.” They just asked me for a plan, they did not say anything. If my plan was to start up a cyber café, that would have been impossible because there is no electricity in Nepal. In Belgium, they would say, it is a good idea, but here, the situation is different.

The role of the local partner of the host country’s organization supporting the return programme could be larger in this respect, both before and after the migrants’ return, with clear communication on the part of this local partner with regard to the (im)possibilities of the available support (Van Houte & Davids, 2008):

> “ They [the local partner] should be an expert in support us in surviving in our own country.

All interviewees considered a close follow-up of their situation through the local organization as essential, and also to adequately adapt the given support to the needs of every individual returnee, as some need extensive support, while others have more own resources available to them:

> “ I consider my return as successful, because I have also financial support from my family. People who have no assistance from family or friends need more money.

> “ Of course my return is not a success. I should not say that everybody is like me, maybe they have a better family, many things depend on that.

Overall, the interviewees clearly maintained that return programmes now forget important dimensions of ‘embeddedness’, such as creating and using social networks, and that an integral approach to support for returnees – with attention to financial, material, economic, educational and social support – is indispensable to achieve sustainability of the return process (Ghosh, 2000; Van Houte & De Koning, 2008).

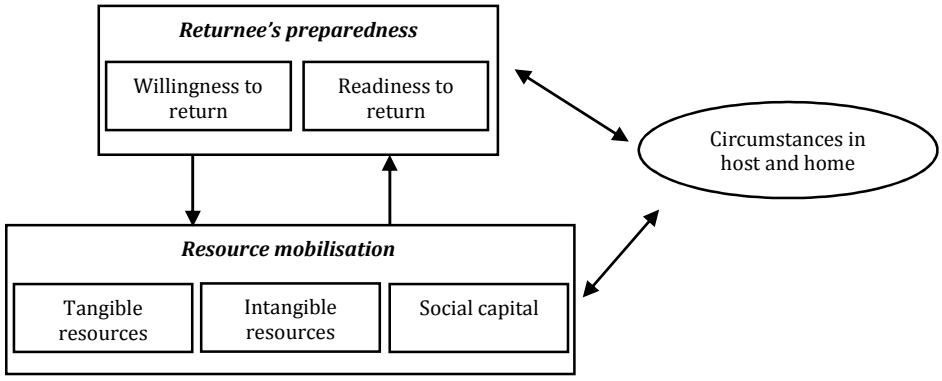
2.5 Conclusion

We should take the study’s limitations into account when considering its conclusions. The limited number of participants and the focus on only one host (Belgium) and one origin/return country (Nepal) limits generalization of our findings. Moreover, we only questioned most of the interviewees after return; only a small number of participants could be interviewed both before and after their return, although this latter approach is preferable (Black *et al*., 2004; Van Houte & Davids, 2008). The heterogeneous composition of the study group, especially in the time that has passed since their return, should be considered as another limitation of the study’s findings. Finally, language and cultural barriers between participants and the interviewer could have caused misunderstandings or limitations in the interviewees’ abilities to express themselves (van de Vijver & Leung, 1997). However, the study’s findings are important to broaden our knowledge and thinking about the return of migrants and return programmes, for scientists, practitioners and policymakers.

Cassarino’s model (2004, p. 180 – see also figure 2.1) on the preparation of return of migrants provides an interesting framework in which to look at our study’s findings. His emphasis on the heterogeneity in returnees’ profiles, certainly regarding their preparedness to return (with two components, willingness and readiness to return) and their ability to mobilize resources (with three components, tangible resources, intangible resources and social capital), with both factors additionally influenced by the conditions in the host and home countries, helps us to understand why some returnees consider their return as successful while others do not.

Our study illustrates how Nepalese asylum applicators whose asylum request in Belgium had been rejected, and for whom this lack of residence documents constituted the main reason to return to their home country, showed little willingness and little readiness to return. Moreover, they also did not have many opportunities to mobilize resources to prepare for their return, mostly because of their precarious living situation in Belgium (e.g., prohibition from working, limited social network). But also, the living circumstances in Nepal affected returnees' possibilities of mobilizing resources before their return, mostly due to Nepal's precarious economic and political situation. This illustrates why most of the respondents in this study, according to Cassarino's model (2004), have a disadvantageous 'point of departure' with regard to realizing a 'successful' return process.

Figure 2.1: Cassarino's model on return preparation



Source Cassarino (2004, p. 180)

The returnees who considered their return as successful (3 out of 20 respondents) did well on the variables indicated by Black and colleagues (2004) to evaluate the 'sustainability' of a return process: (1) they felt no desire to re-emigrate, unless their lives were in danger; (2) they had good income and employment levels (their own shop, or starting up a business); and (3) they felt safe in their country, judging the political situation in Nepal to be relatively good. Moreover, these returnees received support from their social network (financial help, living with parents), illustrating the importance of social support in the return process, which also can reduce the need for additional reintegration support by NGOs.

Ruben and colleagues (2009) and Van Houte and De Koning (2008) assess the sustainability of return through the concept of *embeddedness*. This multidimensional concept refers to the process of a returnee finding his or her own position in society and feeling a sense of belonging to and participating in

society; it has economic, social and psychosocial dimensions. In this study, the 14 respondents for whom life was very difficult after their return showed a relatively low 'embeddedness': economically, none had a stable income; psychosocially, many returnees reported feelings of insecurity, adaptation problems and uncertainty; and, socially, several respondents told us how little of their social network remained after their return. This low level of 'embeddedness' may explain the finding that many of these returnees expressed the desire to re-emigrate, if possible.

To conclude, we can state that interviewees relate their appraisal of their return process to their country of origin to three interrelated factors: (1) the living situation in the host country before the return (documents, work, the social network etc.) – and its influence on the voluntariness of the return decision (Black *et al*., 2004; Cassarino, 2004; IOM, 2002; Van Houte & Davids, 2008); (2) the returnee's image of his or her home country and his or her plans upon return (two elements that also influence the return decision); and (3) the actual living situation in the home country after return (political, economic and social living conditions). These findings, first, indicate an urgent need for a huge shift in the set-up of programmes supporting (possible) returnees, focusing much more on integral support (economic, social, psychological etc.), with extensive components in both the host country (preparation of returnees before re-migration) and the home country (follow-up of returned migrants after their arrival in the country of origin). Second, the returnees' experiences as studied here sharply question the approach of current governmental migration discourses, all of which are extensively focusing on return programmes, because, as presently implemented, they entail only a very minimal added value for the returnees involved, and thus largely elapse the aims of migration policies.

Notes

1. In this paper, the term refugees is used because this agrees with the experiences of the respondents, all of whom stated that they fled their home country because of the political violence. Therefore, our use of the term does not reflect the interpretation as put forward by the 1951 Geneva Convention, or the respondents' current legal status.
2. A. Carlier, personal communication, 15 February 2009.

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3
From social instrument to migration management tool: Assisted voluntary return programmes - The case of Belgium*

*Based on Lietaert, I., Broekaert, E., & Derluyn, I. (2016). From social instrument to migration management tool: Assisted voluntary return programmes – The case of Belgium. *Social Policy & Administration.* Advance online publication.

Abstract

The return of migrants to their country of origin and the development of efficient return measures have become more prominent on the political agenda of many Western European countries. Since policymakers prefer 'voluntary' return, governmental programmes to support the return of migrants – assisted voluntary return (AVR) programmes – were developed as far back as the 1970s and have played an increasingly important role in migration policy over the last three decades. At the same time, general migration policy and welfare systems have undergone profound change, including in the meanings and connotations attached to social welfare, return support and return policy. This raises questions about the implications of these broader societal and policy changes for the widely implemented AVR programmes. In this article, we discuss the interpretation and evolution of AVR programmes by analysing how one particular European country, Belgium, has developed its AVR programme over time. We explore the evolution of the programme's content, target group and institutional positioning, which shed light on its changing goals and are closely linked to a broader shift towards a 'managerial' approach to migration policy and the welfare state. We argue that return support may become decontextualized when it adopts 'conditional entitlement' as a central principle. This leads to strong differentiation, based on personal responsibility, between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' migrants, the levelling down of the support given to returnees, and a more coercive voluntary return policy in which social support is linked to deportation.

3.1 Introduction

In almost all Western European countries, migration policy has developed from a virtual absence of restrictions and government interference at the beginning of the 20th century to the current prevalence of a strict, preventive and repressive approach[1] (Guiraudon & Joppke, 2001; Lindstrøm, 2005; Stalker, 2002). The focus on limiting and controlling migration flows has generated efforts to exclude migrants perceived as 'unwanted' (Lindstrøm, 2005), not least because in public discourses, migrants have often been linked to claims for welfare support and a depletion of welfare resources (Geddes, 2003; Düvell & Jordan 2002). This has been translated into an enforcement of national borders, a more restrictive asylum policy, and the effective return of migrants without a legal residence permit. Most migration policy research has focused on developments in border control (Bernhard & Valsamis, 2010; Papagianni, 2013; Taylor, 2005) and on immigration, asylum and integration policies (Crisp, 2003; Helbling, 2014; Lindstrøm, 2005; Morris, 2007; Schuster, 2005; Stewart & Mulvey, 2014; Szczepanikova, 2011). In doing so, it has drawn attention to these policies' consequences for migrants in particular and for the social welfare state in general, such as the criminalization of migrants, the reproduction of global inequalities through border control (De Giorgi, 2010; Van Houtum & Pijpers, 2007), and the reduction of welfare rights for particular migrant groups (Dwyer, 2004; Schuster, 2005; Stewart & Mulvey, 2014). These consequences have in turn impacted on migrants' ability to integrate and have led to a shift in ideas about the role of states in the provision of welfare rights through immigration and asylum policy. The research focus on border management and on integration and asylum policy has limited study of a current priority in migration policy: the return of migrants to their country of origin (Cassarino, 2008; Ghosh, 2000; Koch 2014; Matrix Insight, 2012).

Today, return migration policy distinguishes between *forced return* or deportation, which involves compulsory return enforced by physical transportation out of the host country, and *voluntary return*, which refers to return out of 'free' will or unforced compliance with an obligation to return to the country of origin (EMN, 2011a). While there has been some research on developments in and consequences of current deportation regimes and policy (Bloch & Schuster, 2005; Lietaert, Broekaert, & Derluyn, 2015; Walters, 2002), little attention has been paid to policy developments concerning voluntary return.

Over the last three decades, voluntary return migration policy has led to a proliferation of governmental Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) programmes (IOM, 2014a). These programmes, mostly implemented in co-operation with the

International Organization for Migration (IOM) (Webber, 2011), provide administrative, logistical and/or financial support to migrants to return to and reintegrate in their country of origin (IOM, 2014a), and play an increasingly important role in the migration policies of European countries (IOM, 2012a; Koser, 2001; Webber, 2011; Whyte & Hirslund, 2013). For example, the number of AVR programmes implemented by the IOM together with European countries, rose from four in 1994 to 18 in 2004 and as many as 26 in 2011 (IOM, 2004, 2012a). As a result, the number of people returning with governmental support also increased, from 26,763 in 2004 to 46,233 in 2013 (IOM, 2014b). Although these programmes operate without physical enforcement and clearly differ from any form of forced return measure, the 'voluntariness' of returns with these programmes remains contested (Blitz, Sales, & Marzano, 2005; Webber, 2011).

Looking at the origin and development of voluntary return policy, we notice that the emphasis on return emerged in the 1970s. Although the return component was not new in migration policy – it had already been part of the labour recruitment measures of most governments in the 1950s and 1960s (Schneider & Kreienbrink, 2010) – there was little need to enforce the return of foreign workers who preferred to stay in periods of economic growth and a high need for labourers. Influenced by the economic recession and the decreasing need for extra labour in the mid-1970s (Brücker *et al.,* 2002; Stalker, 2002), the further expansion of nation states' sovereignty (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002) and growing xenophobic attitudes (Collinson, 1993; Entzinger, 1985; Hammar, 1989), governments started to perceive and approach migration as a 'social problem', associating it in particular with illegality and abuse of the welfare system, and thus needed to be controlled and regulated (Commers & Blommaert, 2001; Kalm, 2012; Nyberg-Sørensen *et al.,* 2002). States attempted to install a zero immigration policy and expected (unemployed) foreign workers still present on their territory to return to their home countries (Brücker *et al.,* 2002; Entzinger, 1985; Stalker, 2002). In order to encourage and prepare foreign labourers to return and to overcome constraints in the return process, a number of Western European governments started to develop special programmes to assist the voluntary return of migrants, which offered financial departure incentives, pre-return training, and business investment in the country of return (Entzinger, 1985; Webber, 2011). However, many of these programmes did not lead to an increase in the number of returnees and soon closed down. Still, these measures legitimated the feeling that return was the 'natural end of the migration cycle' (Hammar, 1985 as cited in Entzinger, 1985).

Following this initial focus on labour migrants and despite the differentiation in migration policy between labour migrants and asylum seekers, the changed political and economic situation soon also led to a restrictive attitude towards

asylum seekers, and governments started to encourage the return of asylum seekers whose applications had been rejected (Noll, 1999). In 1979, Germany developed the first AVR programme for rejected asylum seekers, based on the idea that return assistance was cheaper than prolonging their stay (Noll, 1999). Originally, this assistance only paid for travel-related costs; later on, governmental programmes also facilitated reintegration processes in the country of origin (Noll, 1999; Schneider & Kreienbrink, 2010). Various Western European countries followed soon in developing programmes to assist the return of asylum seekers, especially those rejected[2] (Ghosh, 2000; Matrix Insight, 2012).

In the 1990s, perceptions of migration as a problem area escalated. First, the rising numbers of asylum seekers created a fear of uncontrolled 'inflows' and a 'sense of crisis' in receiving countries, feelings that intensified further after the events of 9/11 (Bloch & Schuster, 2005; Lindstrøm, 2005). The entry of migrants was not only perceived as a problem for the national economy and its welfare system, but also posed a threat to the entire social order (Lindstrøm, 2005; Munck, 2008; Stalker, 2002; Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). Consequently, the social construction of migration as a security issue was used to justify states' actions to tighten up their migration policy and to pursue even more restrictive and repressive measures, such as reinforced border controls, restrictions on entry and residence, and the strengthening of deterrence, including detention and deportation – all aimed at limiting and controlling migration flows (Cassarino, 2008; Lietaert *et al.,* 2015; Munck, 2008; Walters, 2002). Not only was the entry of new migrants considered a problem, but also the fact that asylum seekers whose applications were rejected did not automatically return to their home country (Blitz *et al*., 2005; Noll, 1999). States tried to solve this 'problem of (non-)return' by, amongst other measures, the promotion and support of return processes, since voluntary return was still considered a more humane and cheaper 'solution' than forced removal (Black & Gent, 2006; Noll, 1999). While some programmes for return and reintegration had existed for many years, there has been a clear proliferation of new programmes over the last 20 years (Black, Collyer, & Sommerville, 2011; IOM, 2014b). AVR programmes started to be considered a governmental responsibility and were therefore developed in almost all European countries (Schneider & Kreienbrink, 2010), despite their differing migration histories and asylum policies. Since return policy also determines who is entitled to receive particular kinds of support, this debate has always been related to questions about (entitlement to) welfare and the conceptualization of (non-)citizenship and social rights, thereby highlighting structural tensions within welfare states (Geddes, 2003).

In sum, this overview indicates that, in line with broader societal changes, an evolution in migration policy has taken place, and consequently also in the

meanings and connotations attached to return and to return policy. This raises questions about the implications of these changes for AVR programmes. Can we detect changes in the content and implementation of AVR programmes in parallel with the overall policy changes? While return migration is an important political priority, the evolution of return migration policy and programmes, and in particular in AVR programmes, has not yet been explored (Whyte & Hirslund, 2013). Research has focused mainly on how reintegration in the home country can be improved (Cassarino, 2008), leaving out the programmes' objectives and whether they have evolved over time. This article therefore aims at analysing how an AVR programme was implemented in one specific context, i.e. Belgium as an EU member state, from its inception until today. Further, we discuss how its evolution relates to the evolution of overall migration policy described above and to changes in the wider social welfare state, and reflect on some implications of the changes observed.

3.2 Assisted voluntary return: The case of Belgium

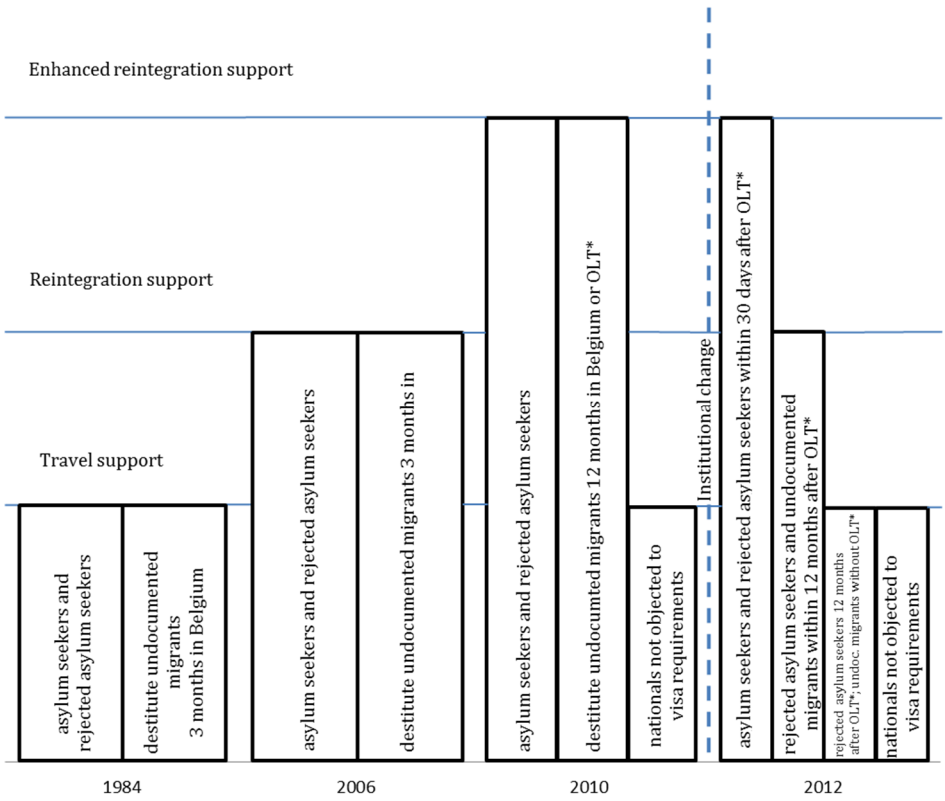
This article focuses on one specific national context, since the various national AVR programmes that have been developed in European receiving countries have adopted quite divergent approaches and contents (Koser, 2001). Although it is likely that similarities with the return policies of other European countries can be found, as is the case with national asylum policies, a comparative approach or generalization of the findings to other countries is beyond the scope of this article. This article analyses one national AVR programme to explore the shifts within it in depth (Taylor-Gooby, 2002). In the evolution of AVR programmes the Belgian context is interesting, since AVR started quite early in Belgium and has evolved into a well-developed, continuous and structured programme rather than the time-limited project typical of most countries (Whyte & Hirslund, 2013), rendering it possible to explore changes in it over an extended period.

For this policy analysis, we draw upon the findings of a directed qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) based on an assessment of a range of documents (including policy documents, policy notes, annual reports, and research reports) on the Belgian AVR programme from its start until today. The resulting information was grouped around three themes: programme content, target group and institutional positioning (see figure 3.1), since these variables are able to capture the interpretation and evolution of the AVR programme.

In the following sections, we present the data clustered around these three themes. First, we start by examining the development of the AVR programme's content. Second, we take a closer look at the programme's target group to explore who is entitled to receive support and who is not. Third, we investigate the

programme's institutional positioning in Belgian migration policy. Lastly, we bring these three elements together and discuss how their evolution has had considerable implications for the goals of the AVR programme and can be related to the broader evolution of migration policy and social welfare state approaches.

Figure 3.1: Evolution in content, target group and institutional positioning of the AVR programme



* Order to leave the territory

3.2.1 Development and content of the AVR programme

In 1984, Belgium was the second country to develop an AVR programme for (rejected) asylum seekers: the 'Return and Emigration of Asylum Seekers Ex Belgium' programme (Matrix Insight, 2012). As in many European countries, the Belgian Government contracted the national department of the IOM to implement this programme (Fedasil, 2009a). In the agreement between the Belgian Government and the IOM, the programme was described as "a voluntary return programme for asylum seekers and destitute third country nationals wishing to return to their home country or to emigrate to a third country voluntarily"

(Fedasil, 2009a, p. 7). Voluntary return was defined as occurring "when the migrant expresses freely and in an unequivocal manner the choice he has made in this sense" (Fedasil, 2009a, p. 7) and it was emphasized that "as the REAB programme is a voluntary return programme, migrants can always change their minds during the processing of their application" (IOM, 2009, p. 136) and hence withdraw their application to depart. A specific characteristic of the Belgian AVR programme was that the IOM, echoing the German example, collaborated with a network of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), reception centres and local authorities to reach the target group and to provide pre-departure counselling (Fedasil, 2009a). The support was limited to the physical return (hereafter referred to as travel support), including pre-departure counselling, travel costs (flight ticket, luggage), assistance during flight transit and an optional small cash sum to compensate for the cost of travel from the airport to the final destination (Fedasil, 2009c).

After implementing the programme for several years, a number of actors noted that restricting the support to travel support was insufficient to overcome the difficulties encountered when returning to the home country, and several pilot projects were started to enlarge the assistance with support that facilitated reintegration and the restarting of life in the country of origin (hereafter referred to as reintegration support) (Fedasil, 2009a; VWV, 2005). These pilot projects provided continuing support before and after return for micro-business start-ups, training, medical support and housing, or support tailored to the particular needs of the returnee (Caritas International, 2004; Fedasil, 2009a; VWV, 2005).

In 2006, these different reintegration projects were brought under the coordination of the Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil)[3] in order to create one single national reintegration programme that complemented the existing travel support programme (Fedasil, 2009a). The reintegration support consisted of material support[4] in the country of origin and some additional support for particular vulnerable groups. The reintegration support was provided through organizations in the country of origin, operating as local partners of the Belgian organizations contracted by Fedasil to implement the reintegration support (reintegration partners: the IOM and three Belgian NGOs). However, based on an in-depth evaluation of the first years of reintegration support (2006-8), Fedasil (2009a) concluded that the reintegration support provided was insufficiently differentiated to be able to address the diverse individual situations of returnees. Moreover, local partners in the home countries also indicated that the allocated reintegration budget for individual returnees was insufficient, certainly when the support was aimed at setting up a business or at providing assistance to vulnerable people (Caritas International, 2009), a picture confirmed by individual returnees (Lietaert, Derluyn, & Broekaert., 2014). The

evaluation further concluded that access to the support was inadequately regulated. This resulted in the reintegration programme virtually replacing the travel support programme, causing increasing programme costs without generating proportional added value (Fedasil, 2009a). These findings led to the conclusion that the support itself needed to be enlarged, but also that its allocation needed to be more selective.

In 2007, the European Return Fund (European Commission, 2007), a financial instrument for EU member states, was created to promote the integrated management of forced and voluntary return measures at the national level through, amongst other elements, financial support for the organization of pre- and post-voluntary return assistance and counselling (Schneider & Kreienbrink, 2010). Belgium took this new Fund as an opportunity to achieve its preconceived goals and to enlarge the resourcing of the national programme with European funding. The reintegration support programme, as created in 2006 and financed from national resources, continued its approach of individual social support after return but was enlarged with extra financial support, funded by the EU, for returning migrants who want to start a micro-business and for vulnerable people (Fedasil, 2010). Again, both the IOM and a Belgian NGO were selected as implementing partners.

3.2.2 Target group

Alongside the changes in content described above, the target groups in the Belgian AVR programme also changed over time (see figure 3.1). At its start in 1984, the entry criteria were quite broad, covering anyone without a residence permit, irrespective of administrative antecedents, on the condition that "people with a temporary (asylum seekers) or permanent (recognized refugees) residence permit relinquish their status and residence permit prior to admission to the programme" (Fedasil, 2009a, p. 8). The programme's main target groups were, however, defined as asylum seekers who abandoned their claim (category a), rejected asylum seekers (category b) and undocumented migrants who had not applied for asylum (category c) (Fedasil, 2009a). In the beginning, as well as persons with a residence permit, all citizens of EU countries and countries within the Schengen Zone were excluded. Later, exceptions were made, and entitlement to a flight ticket was also granted to nationals of the ten new member states when the EU enlarged in 2003 and also to the citizens of Romania and Bulgaria who became EU citizens in 2007.[5] Undocumented migrants had to have resided for at least three months on Belgian territory, and a social report that demonstrated their destitution was required. This latter element indicates that it was mainly people's needs that determined the entitlement to support, as "[a] voluntary return programme is designed, theoretically, for people who wish to leave a

territory, but do not have the means to pay for this" (Fedasil, 2009a, p. 30). An analysis of participation in the AVR programme between 1994 and 2004 showed that after an initially low level of uptake, an increasing number of undocumented migrants returned through the AVR programme (Foblets & Vanbeselaere, 2006). In 2004, the count of undocumented migrants exceeded the number of rejected asylum seekers for the first time (Foblets & Vanbeselaere, 2006; VWV, 2005). This tendency continued until 2010 (IOM, 2012b).

In 2006, the travel support was enhanced by reintegration support and any person who returned voluntarily and needed further reintegration assistance could apply for reintegration support to one of the reintegration partners, which decided on whether to grant it (EMN, 2010; Fedasil, 2009a). However, figures from 2008-9 show that the extra reintegration support was allocated to rejected asylum seekers twice as often as to undocumented migrants (Fedasil, 2010; IOM, 2009), a finding attributed to the greater availability of information about this type of reintegration support in the reception structures for asylum seekers (Rentmeester, 2008).

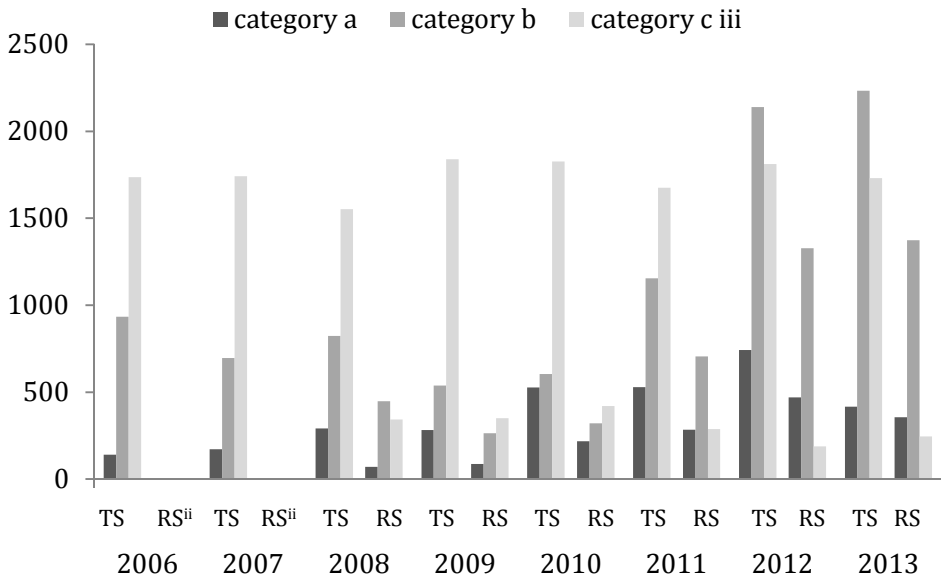
The implementation of the EU Return Fund enlarged the initial reintegration support to cover setting up a micro-business and particular vulnerable groups of returnees but did not introduce extra entry criteria for asylum seekers (category a) and rejected asylum seekers (category b). Nonetheless, a growing emphasis was put on the idea that AVR support consisted of a range of increasing layers of support (travel support; reintegration support; enlarged reintegration support), and therefore needed to relate to proportionally stricter admission criteria (EMN, 2011b; Fedasil, 2009b; Fedasil, 2011). While the entry criteria for (rejected) asylum seekers remained unchanged, the criteria for undocumented migrants were altered: a social report that determined their destitution was still required to entitle them to travel support, but their access to reintegration support was determined either by the time they had resided in Belgium or by receipt of an order to leave the territory.[6] Concerning the first criterion, only migrants who had lived in Belgium for a minimum of 12 months could be given this reintegration support. A change that was introduced in the belief that it would help to avoid abuse (i.e. coming to Belgium with the goal of returning with reintegration support) and enable selection of those returnees most in need of reintegration support, having been away from their home country for a long time (Fedasil, 2009b; Rentmeester, 2008). In contrast, with the introduction of the other eligibility criterion, namely having an order to leave the territory, it were returnees' residence documents that determined their access to additional reintegration support, instead of their needs, as was previously the case. Here, a dual focus emerges: reintegration support must help those returnees needing it, but must also convince those migrants whom the government wants to return.

In addition, from 2010 and onwards the scope of exclusion was extended to people from Balkan countries for whom the visa requirements to enter the EU disappeared,[7] and to Brazilians, who were mainly undocumented migrants and of whom abuse of the programme was presumed: these migrants could only receive travel support and were totally excluded from reintegration support (Fedasil, 2011, 2012a; Kruispunt Migratie-Integratie, 2012). The latter also impacted on the figures, as figures from 2011 showed a decrease in the number of undocumented migrants in the AVR programme (IOM, 2012b). But the percentage of undocumented migrants who received reintegration support also decreased and was now exceeded by a growing number of asylum seekers and rejected asylum seekers receiving reintegration support (respectively 17, 54 and 61 per cent) (see figure 3.2). Yet, it should be noted that the organizations providing pre-departure counselling always had the discretionary space to make exceptions, based on the evaluation of an applicant's needs. This enabled them to negotiate with Fedasil on refusing support to people who were in fact eligible and, at the same time, to allocate support to returnees who were – according to the criteria – not eligible (Fedasil, 2009b).

In May 2012, the entitlement criteria underwent new drastic changes. First, the entire package of reintegration support (both national and EU funded) was limited to asylum seekers whose procedure was still ongoing and to rejected asylum seekers who applied for return support within the 30-day time limit imposed by their order to leave the territory. Second, only rejected asylum seekers and undocumented migrants who decided to return through the programme within 12 months after receiving an order to leave the territory were entitled to receive the national reintegration support. Third, people who had never asked for asylum or received an order to leave the territory were only entitled to a flight ticket and were thus excluded from any reintegration support (Fedasil, 2013). These new criteria indicate that the level of reintegration support became strictly related to the administrative procedures of the applicant (i.e. applications for asylum), and to the time frame within which the person decided to return: the faster you returned, the more support you could receive. These changes were immediately noticeable in the figures for beneficiaries of the AVR programme (see figure 3.2): in 2012, rejected asylum seekers again became the largest beneficiary group of the travel support, and, together with applicants who quit their asylum procedure (category a), they constituted two thirds of the AVR returnees (Fedasil, 2013, 2014). The absolute number of rejected asylum seekers in the programme also showed a remarkable increase in 2011. The figures for reintegration support revealed that in 2012 more than two-thirds of the (rejected) asylum seekers involved (categories a and b) received reintegration support on top of the travel support. In 2013, this percentage amounted to 85 per cent of the

asylum seekers (category a), while for undocumented migrants this figure dropped to 14 percent (Fedasil, 2013, 2014).

Figure 3.2[i] Allocation of travel support and reintegration support in the AVR programme (2006–13)



Sources: Caritas International, 2008; IOM, 2009; IOM, 2010; Fedasil, 2013; Fedasil, 2014.
[i] TS= travel support; RS = reintegration support; [ii] No data are available regarding the distribution of reintegration support between the different categories of beneficiaries in 2006 and 2007; [iii] category a= asylum seekers who abandoned their claim; category b= rejected asylum seekers; category c= undocumented migrants who had not applied for asylum.

3.2.3 Institutional positioning

As a third element, we explore the institutional positioning of the AVR programme, since this sheds light on the political interpretation of AVR. In contrast with other European countries, at its start in 1984 the Belgian AVR programme resided under the Ministry of Social Integration and not, as in other EU member states, under a Ministry of Migration or Immigration Department (Fedasil, 2009a). In the second period, the return programme was coordinated by a federal agency (Fedasil), which still resided under the Ministry of Social Integration. According to the acting Minister of Social Integration in 2004, "[t]he support for voluntary return must be considered as individual support to redefine the migration project, […] as one of the resources to support the personal project of an asylum seeker" [author's translation] (VWV, 2005, p. 11, citing the 2004

policy note of Minister Arena). This institutional positioning of the AVR programme under the Ministry of Social Integration created a political and institutional separation between voluntary return, on the one hand, and migration control and forced return, on the other. The latter is constituted under the Immigration Department, and as a result, two separated dynamics within Belgian return policy emerged. According to Fedasil, "[t]he separation of voluntary and forced return enables a perspective in which voluntary return is considered as an instrument of social support rather than migration control" (Fedasil, 2009a, p. 18). The objective of AVR was thus to render return feasible and to solve problems that might complicate a return, not to persuade, or push, migrants to return (Fedasil, 2012b).

The first changes in this institutional positioning occurred in 2008, when, for the first time in history, a Belgian Minister of Migration and Asylum Policy was appointed. The Minister was responsible, together with the Immigration Department, for the entry, residence, establishment and removal of foreign nationals[8] (EMN, 2010, 2011b). Fedasil, however, remained under the supervision of the Ministry of Social Integration (EMN, 2010). Although this institutional reorganization seemed to consolidate the separate development of voluntary and forced return policies, the installation of a ministry responsible for migration signalled the increasing importance of migration as an issue in Belgian politics (EMN, 2009). Reflecting this development, changes in the separation between voluntary and forced return appeared in the first policy note of the Secretary of State for Migration in 2009, in which he announced an intention to co-operate more closely with the Department of Social Integration "towards a more integrated return policy" (EMN, 2010, p. 43, citing the 2009 policy note of Minister Wathelet). In her national programme of the EU Return Fund, the Belgian government also indicated "[the] development of a more integrated return policy that comprises voluntary return, forced return and sustainable reintegration in the country of origin" (EMN, 2010, p. 46) as one of the key objectives.

The institutional reform continued. In 2011, a Secretary of State of Asylum and Migration was installed with responsibility for the entry, residence and removal of foreign nationals and the national return policy (on both forced and voluntary return). This marked the institutionalized integration of all aspects of migration and asylum policies into one responsible ministry (EMN, 2012). The new Secretary of State immediately announced a more proactive return policy as one of its main policy priorities (EMN, 2012):

> Responsibility for the return policy is divided between the Immigration Department and Fedasil. Through cooperation and mutual synchronization, both components will be implemented in a coherent way. The programme of voluntary return will be actively used to offer persons who are no longer entitled to stay on the territory a feasible alternative. […] Maximal attention will be given to return, voluntary if possible, forced if necessary. […] If the procedure for voluntary return fails, measures will be taken to impose a forced return. [author's translation] (De Block, 2011)

In particular, emphasis was placed on the effective return of irregularly resident migrants (EMN, 2013), and voluntary and forced return policies were integrated so as to develop 'one coherent return policy', with voluntary and forced return measures serving this common priority (Fedasil 2012a).

As a consequence of this drive for an efficient and integrated return policy, AVR became a part of the management chain, with a main focus on managing the entire process of asylum seekers, from entry to settlement or return. Rejected asylum seekers were given 30 days to decide whether to step into the AVR programme. If they did not so decide within the 30 days, they became eligible for forced removal (cf. the introduction of time-phased entry criteria).

3.3 From social instrument to migration management tool

The analysis of the content, target group and institutional positioning of Belgium's AVR programme clearly indicates profound changes. Initially, and for a long period, the Belgian AVR programme was presented as an instrument of social support, designed to enable a broad group of migrants to return to their country of origin and to present voluntary return as a credible and feasible migration project (Fedasil, 2009a). The programme did not target broader developmental goals in the countries of return (Matrix Insight, 2012), since the reintegration support only focused on providing resources for the individual returnee. We acknowledge the criticism that the programme's implementation did not fulfil its representation as a social instrument. For example, it was not a genuine alternative as the return was not really voluntary, and the support was too small to start up durable projects (Foblets & Vanbeselaere, 2006; Rentmeester, 2008). Yet, we argue that the programme could still be considered a social instrument that created opportunities for migrants to return under better circumstances. First, the programme was broadly accessible, and not signing up for the programme or withdrawing an application had no negative implications. Second, voluntary return was clearly separated from forced removal. Third, there was a large involvement of NGOs in implementing the support. Lastly, the level of

support a returnee received depended on his needs, and exceptions to the programme's entry criteria could be made for vulnerable persons who were not eligible.

In contrast, the later evolution of the AVR programme sketched a changing picture, which can be placed within the general shift towards 'migration management' in migration policy (Geiger & Pécoud, 2010) and broader developments in the social welfare state in Western Europe (Dwyer, 2004). This is particularly the case for most recent changes, with the introduction of time-phased and procedure-dependent entry criteria and the integration of voluntary and forced return measures into one overall return policy. First, the introduction of these criteria has led to a narrowing of the population that has access to the support, suggesting a changed objective for reintegration support. The programme no longer targets a broad group of migrants, but aims at steering and quickening (by limiting the available time frame) the departure of those migrants who are no longer entitled to stay. Access to the most extensive levels of support no longer depends on migrants' needs, as reintegration support is now a privilege or incentive for quick deciders. Additionally, voluntary return is now closely linked to the asylum procedure, resulting in the partial exclusion of undocumented migrants.

These changes point to two connected developments. First, reintegration support is now increasingly used as a governmental tool for managing and controlling migration flows, in line with the broader move towards 'migration management' and into 'managerialism' in social policy (Clarke & Newman, 1997; Geiger & Pécoud, 2010; Tayler-Gooby, 2002). In line with the central idea that states need to control their expenditure and demarcate tightly the legitimate receivers of welfare state benefits to maximize their efficiency (Bommes & Geddes, 2000; Taylor-Gooby, 2002), the Belgian state also aims to base support for voluntarily returning migrants on clear 'objective' criteria (time and procedure) and to ensure efficient outcomes (decreasing the numbers of migrants re-migrating after return). We argue that by creating the impression of a fair, rules-based determination system through an apparently technical approach, the inclusion and exclusion of particular individuals and groups is presented as a depoliticized, procedural matter of 'following rules', rather than as a matter of making political choices (Geiger & Pécoud, 2010; Kalm, 2012).

Second, in accordance with the rhetoric of 'good legal migrants' and 'bad illegal aliens' in immigration policy (De Giorgi, 2010), a pronounced distinction is here entrenched between migrants 'deserving' support and, in growing numbers, migrants 'not deserving' support (Collyer & De Haas, 2012; Sales, 2002; Watters, 2007). Legitimate returnees, those deserving support, are narrowed to migrants who requested asylum when entering the country and respond immediately to a

rejection of their asylum application. We argue that here also there are strong parallels with the principle of 'conditionality' in current welfare reform processes (Dwyer, 2004): in a wide range of social policy sectors (e.g. social security, housing, education and health), entitlement to welfare rights is granted under precondition of particular state-endorsed standards or regulations. This approach to welfare rights, the so-called 'Third Way' (Giddens, 1998), puts the focus on 'individual responsibility', whereby citizens are considered active individuals, acting as the entrepreneurs of their own lives, seeking to maximize their quality of life through personal choice (Roche, 1992; Rose, 2006; Vandenbroeck, Roose, & De Bie, 2011). Exclusion from welfare rights due to non-compliance with certain rules is thus considered to be an individual choice and responsibility (Dwyer, 2004; Vandenbroeck *et al*., 2011). In return policy, too, the strong dichotomization of deserving and undeserving returnees creates the idea that exclusion from reintegration support is a logical consequence of migrants' own choices (entering 'illegally' or overstaying), thereby contributing to the larger societal and political acceptability of the forcible return of 'non-compliant', 'undeserving' migrants (Cassarino, 2008; Koser, 2001).

This introduction of time-phased and procedure-dependent criteria closely relates to the second large change we noted in our analysis of the evolution in the Belgian AVR programme: the integration of the AVR programme into a dual-track strategy (Koser, 2001), with those migrants who do not sign up to the AVR programme becoming eligible for forced return. The current migration management discourse indicates that the efficient management of migration flows needs 'policy coherence' (Geiger & Pécoud, 2010). From a political perspective, striving for divergent priorities within separate policies on voluntary and forced return may undermine an efficient overall return policy, and voluntary and forced return is, and should be, linked (Geiger & Pécoud, 2010; Schneider & Kreienbrink, 2010). According to this view, return management therefore requires the integration and equal development of both voluntary and forced return programmes, with an important focus on the realization of a mutual interest (European Commission, 2007; Geiger & Pécoud, 2010; Schneider & Kreienbrink, 2010). We argue that this integration shows that the agenda of migration control – the domestic interest – overshadows the initial objectives of voluntary return programmes (enabling return), as well as the needs of potential returnees (Blitz *et al.,* 2005). The integration of voluntary return into a single return policy breaks down the voluntary, non-binding character of the voluntary return programme, and compliance pressure has been intensified by the introduction of time-phased criteria. Again, and equally to an increasingly restrictive asylum policy, return policy is becoming more coercive (Sales, 2002), and voluntary return programmes are increasingly being instrumentalized to expand the removal of migrants from states' territory (Cassarino, 2008).

3.4 Conclusion

In this article, we have examined the evolution of the Belgian AVR programme and have marked changes in the programme's goals and implementation. These can be related to the current focus on migration management in the field of migration policy as well as to large changes in the social welfare state. Although AVR programmes were created to enable the return of migrants to their country of origin, our analysis of the Belgian AVR programme has shown that it is possible to adopt a social interpretation of these AVR programmes, with a focus on creating opportunities for returnees distinct from forced removal measures. We have argued that the focus on return management and the drive to achieve an 'integrated' and 'coherent' approach to return migration have resulted in an inversion of this initial social standpoint. The goals of the programme have changed from enabling those wanting to return to pushing the return of those who are no longer entitled to stay, thereby changing the balance of the programme to favour the government over migrants.

Under the guise of efficiency, coherence and cost containment (Dwyer, 2004; Geiger & Pécoud, 2010; Kalm, 2012; Pécoud, 2010), and shaped within wider trends towards 'managerialism' and 'individual responsibility' in European welfare states (Dwyer, 2004; Geddes, 2003; Walters, 1997), this evolution in return policy has induced a changed perception of returnees and their needs. In the Belgian case study, the initial idea of providing social support to returnees to deal with a range of obstacles during and after their return has been wiped out by the introduction of time-phased and procedure-dependent entry criteria. Support for returnees is now a decontextualized issue, and returnees only 'deserve' support when obeying the state's rules. 'Conditional entitlement' is now a guiding principle, as in many other social policy sectors, and voluntary return policy has become a coercive instrument (Blitz *et al.,* 2005) through which 'voluntary return' is narrowed down to removing unauthorized migrants (Cassarino, 2008).

Notes

1. The concept 'migration policies of Western European countries' refers to the regulation of international migration, the process by which non-nationals move to or from a country (IOM, 2014a). When referring in this article to a 'migrant' or to 'migration', we therefore mean the movement of a person or group of persons across international borders and to any kind of movement, whatever its length (intentional or otherwise), cause (forced or voluntary), mode of entry (legal or 'illegal') or purpose. When applicable, further distinction is made between 'asylum seekers' (non-EU nationals who have made an application for asylum in respect of which a final decision has not yet

been taken), 'refugees' (migrants who receive – through applying for asylum – refugee status under the 1951 Refugee Convention) and 'rejected asylum seekers' (migrants who receive a negative answer to their application) (EMN, 2014).

2. These AVR programmes target both asylum seekers and rejected asylum seekers.
3. Fedasil was established in 2002 within the competence of the Ministry of Social Integration. Since then, it has been responsible for the reception of asylum seekers and, since 2006, also for the coordination of the AVR programme (Fedasil, 2009a).
4. The material support consisted of € 700 per person (maximum € 1,750 per family) and, in the case of vulnerable groups (pregnant women, unaccompanied minors, victims of human trafficking, elderly people, persons with a disability or a severe illness), another € 700 were added. This amount was not given in cash; rather, purchases or payments were made by local organizations (Fedasil, 2009a, 2010).
5. Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia joined the EU in 2004, Bulgaria and Romania in 2007. The exceptional measures to allow nationals of these countries into the AVR programme were all removed in 2010 (Fedasil, 2011).
6. An order to leave the territory is given to migrants who receive a negative answer to their asylum request and to migrants who are intercepted without a valid residence permit. It requires the migrant to return to a country where they are entitled to stay. Mostly, migrants are given 30 days to respond to the order to leave the territory, after which they become eligible for forced removal (Kruispunt Migratie-Integratie, 2014).
7. It was presumed that people who could travel to the EU without visa requirements could reach Belgium quite 'easily' and were therefore no longer entitled to the (cash) reinstallation grant or for reintegration support. This measure was taken to limit the risk of the support becoming a pull factor for new migrants (IOM, 2011).
8. Owing to governmental reforms, the function of the Minister of Migration and Asylum Policy evolved in 2009 into the function of federal Secretary of State of Migration and Asylum Policies, though with no change in responsibilities (EMN, 2010).

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4
Between compulsion and choice: The return decision process of migrants in the host country*

*Based on Lietaert, I., Broekaert, E., & Derluyn, I. (in preparation). Between compulsion and choice: The return decision process of migrants in the host country.

Abstract

Despite the growing number of people returning with assisted voluntary return (AVR) programmes, little is known about the return decision processes of migrants who have decided to return, and were living in constrained conditions in the host country, at least in terms of their residence status (insecure or no status). Based on 85 interviews, the article analysed the living contexts, return motives and lived experiences of Armenian and Georgian migrants who participated to the Belgian AVR programme. Considering return migration as a 'situated concept', the data demonstrated a large diversity in return decision processes, whereby several 'forcing factors' impacted returnees' decisions, e.g., current living conditions, lack of a residence status, health problems and family members' wishes. While those were elements of 'force', respondents also labelled their decision as a (constrained) choice. These multidimensional, nuanced views on the 'voluntary' and 'forced' character of return migration illustrate its ambiguity, urging to view return migration as a situated and contextual concept that receives its meaning from returnees' viewpoints. Yet, for most respondents, this return was more a new migration than a simple 'homecoming', a perspective that not only furthers our knowledge on return migration, but also holds possibilities to adapt support processes for returnees.

4.1 Introduction

Current restrictive migration policies in Western Europe increasingly emphasize the voluntary return of asylum seekers, rejected asylum seekers and undocumented migrants to their country of origin (Cassarino, 2008; Matrix Insight, 2012). As an instrument for enabling, encouraging or stimulating this return, many EU host countries have developed so-called 'assisted voluntary return' (AVR) programmes, governmental support programmes providing administrative, logistic, and/or financial support to different groups of migrants in order to help them to return to and reintegrate into their country of origin. While in 1994, only four European countries were implementing AVR programmes, this had increased to 18 countries by 2004, and 26 by 2011, which consequently also led to a substantial increase in the numbers of people returning with governmental support (IOM, 2004, 2012).

Despite the increasing policy focus on this group, in particular on encouraging and assisting migrants to return, and the growing numbers of returnees (Blitz, Sales, & Marzano, 2005; Cassarino, 2008; Webber, 2011), there is a lack of knowledge about the profiles, motives and perspectives of migrants returning with AVR-support (Whyte & Hirslund, 2013; Zimmermann, 2012). Yet, these insights are needed to develop support programmes that appropriately meet the needs of (potential) returnees (Matrix Insight, 2012; Whyte & Hirslund, 2013). Improved knowledge of this group of returnees will therefore enable social workers in various welfare settings in the host countries, who are all likely to encounter (rejected) asylum seekers in their work environment (Fell & Fell, 2013), to be better equipped to support migrants who are considering returning to their country of origin (Carr, 2014). In what follows, we firstly deepen the central concepts 'return migration', return decision process' and 'voluntariness' before turning to our empirical study.

4.1.1 Returning migrants in host countries

Within the broad field of migration studies, the notion of return migration, understood as the process of returning to the country of origin after residing for a certain period abroad, covers a variety of forms of mobility (Čapo, 2010). Several subgroups within the group of returnees are sometimes denoted, based on the time the returnee stays in the country of origin once (s)he has returned (e.g., occasional, seasonal, temporary and permanent return [King, 2000]), returnees' reasons for returning (e.g., failure to reach their migration goals, retirement, or a nostalgic relationship to the homeland (Cerase, 1974; Wessendorf, 2010) and returnees' legal status before returning to the country of origin (e.g., refugee,

labour migrant (high- or low-skilled, expatriate or entrepreneur), student, asylum-seeker or undocumented migrant).

Researchers have tried to understand the motives of migrants in host countries for returning to their country of origin and the factors influencing this process. Deciding whether or not to return is a complex process in which migrants simultaneously weigh multiple considerations and mostly return for a series of interconnected reasons, rather than just on the basis of a single return motive (De Haas, 2011; King, 2000; Senyürekli & Menjivar, 2012). Investigating the return decision processes of migrants who would potentially return through an AVR programme, Black and colleagues (2004) identified a range of economic, social, personal and political factors in the host and home countries that influence migrants' decision to return to stay. These authors concluded that conditions in the home country have a larger influence on the return decision than conditions in the host country, and found no associations between the respondents' legal status and their return motives. In contrast, a study of the views of Afghan residents in the UK on return and AVR programmes pointed out that migrants' residence status was the most important factor affecting their desire to return, with those awaiting a decision on asylum applications and others with insecure residence status being the least interested in return (Blitz *et al.*, 2005). Furthermore, a number of researchers argue that political factors in the home country (peace and security) are of primary importance in the decision-making processes (Black *et al.*, 2004; Blitz *et al.*, 2005; Van Wijk, 2008), while the availability of support programmes in the host country seems to have little influence (Black *et al.*, 2004). Decision processes on return are thus possibly impacted by a range of different factors framed in the particular social context (Black *et al.*, 2004; Senyürekli & Menjivar, 2012; Zimmermann, 2012). At the same time, individuals also make personal choices and exert agency; these factors are thus not simply a series of deterministic factors (De Haas, 2011). Following Long and Oxfeld (2004), we therefore consider return migration to be a 'situated concept', framed in and impacted on by particular contexts, events and experiences, and at the same time highly personal (Black *et al.*, 2004) and receiving its specific meaning from the returning individuals' experiences and points of view.

These questions about migrants' motives for returning (or not) and the space they have to exert agency during the migration process relate to the important notion of 'voluntariness' in migration studies (Ottonelli & Torresi, 2013). While studies have often strictly separated 'forced' and 'voluntary' migration (Turton, 2003), scholars increasingly argue that this distinction is rather blurred, since decisions to migrate are often a response to a complex set of factors of both compulsion and choice (Turton, 2003; Van Hear, Brubaker, & Bessa, 2009). However, a sharp distinction between 'voluntary' and 'forced' migration is largely maintained in

migration policy, with both categories, determining migrants' rights and entitlement to support (Ottonelli & Torresi, 2013; Van Hear *et al.*, 2009). This distinction is also maintained in return migration policy, with 'voluntary return' referring to a return out of 'free' will (or compliance with an 'order to return to the country of origin' without the use of force), and 'forced return' meaning a return that is enforced by compulsory physical transportation out of the host country (EMN, 2011). Webber (2011, p. 103), however, argues that "virtually none of the schemes currently operating as 'voluntary return programmes' from Europe meet the criteria for voluntariness". If 'voluntary' is understood as a 'genuine, not induced choice', this would require that the returnee has (at least) a legal basis for staying in the host country. In reality, most migrants who return through AVR programmes comply with this 'voluntary' return because they lack any hope of still obtaining a residence permit and/or they want to avoid staying as an undocumented migrant in the host country and the related risk of forced repatriation to their country of origin (Black *et al.*, 2004; Strand *et al.*, 2008). Yet, it remains unclear how returnees themselves experience the elements of compulsion and choice in the return decision process, in particular those migrants who have a precarious (temporary) or no permission to stay in the host country (Blitz *et al.*, 2005; Turton, 2003).

All these studies are based on migrants' *hypothetical* return intentions and the decision-making processes of *potential* returnees, which might significantly differ from the *actual* return motives of returnees, given that the correlation between migrants' intentions and their actual behaviour is weak, and intentions may change over time (Black *et al.*, 2004; De Haas, Fokkema, & Fihri, 2015). In this study, we aim to uncover the return motives and perspectives of migrants who have already decided to return 'voluntarily', with a particular focus on an understudied group in this field, migrants with an insecure or no residence status[1]. Considering return migration as a 'situated concept' (Long & Oxfeld, 2004) we will investigate the complex and multi-layered decision processes of returnees who decide to return within the framework of a support programme for voluntary returnees, giving particular attention to lived experiences in the host country and the way these impact on migrants' decisions to return. These enhanced insights into returnees' decision-making processes will be helpful for social workers in developing appropriate support interventions for returning migrants.

4.2 Methods

4.2.1 Study setting and participants

Participants were recruited from a group of migrants who returned through the Belgian AVR programme and received additional reintegration support from the non-governmental organization (NGO) Caritas International. Most migrants who want to return first receive some pre-departure counselling from social workers in the refugee reception centres or in local social services. They are then referred to one of the organizations in charge of implementing the reintegration support part of the AVR programme; Caritas International is one of those. The return and reintegration programme as a whole provides returnees with organizational (i.e., travel documents and flight ticket), financial (i.e., return premium and reintegration budget) and reintegration support (i.e., counselling in the host country to prepare the return; advice and support from a local NGO in the home country to enhance the reintegration process) (Fedasil, 2009). At the time of the study (2010-2012), the entry criteria for the AVR programme[2] were determined as "anyone without a permanent residence permit, irrespective of administrative antecedents, on condition that people with a temporary (asylum seekers) or permanent (recognized refugees) residence permit relinquish their status and residence permit prior to admission to the programme" (Fedasil, 2009, p. 8).

Since conditions in the country one returns to may also influence return decisions (Black *et al.*, 2004), we limited the study to two return countries from the same region, the Southern Caucasian republics Armenia and Georgia, two countries to which a relatively high number of migrants residing in Belgium decide to return on a voluntarily basis (IOM, 2010). Both countries are characterized by a high emigration rate, which markedly intensified in recent decades (Gevorkyan, Marshuryan, & Gevorkyan, 2006; Hofmann & Buckley, 2012). Natural disasters, armed conflicts and the socio-political crisis after the collapse of the Soviet Union provoked the departure of many Armenians and Georgians at the end of the 20th century. Today, both countries are recovering from the hard years following their independence, while poor socio-economic and unstable political conditions are still pushing factors for emigration, mainly to Russia, but also to Western Europe and elsewhere (Gevorkyan *et al.*, 2006; Hofmann & Buckley, 2012).

Table 4.1: Socio-demographic characteristics[i]

	n (%)
All returning migrants involved (n=142)	
Male	69 (48.6)
Female	44 (31.0)
Children (-18)[ii]	26 (18.3)
Children (+18)[ii]	3 (2.1)
Age at return (n=142) (years)[iii]	32.8 (17.8; 0.4-72.3)
Country of origin (n=85)	
Armenia	50 (58.8)
Georgia	35 (41.2)
Family composition of 'returning unit' (n=85)	
Single	59 (69.4)
Couple	8 (9.4)
Family	18 (21.2)
Time in Belgium (n=85) (months)[iii]	20.16 (20.52 ; 1-132)
Status when returning (n=85)	
Residence permission	1 (1.2)
Ongoing asylum application	28 (32.9)
Rejected asylum application	47 (55.3)
Never asked for asylum	9 (10.6)
Housing situation at the moment of return (n=85)	
Asylum structure[iv]	39 (45.9)
Family/friends/acquaintances	27 (31.8)
Private renting	6 (7.1)
Shelter/street	10 (11.8)
Closed centre	3 (3.5)

[i]This study consists of 85 'returning units', including persons, couples or families, representing 142 individuals in all; [ii]Children/youth (division between minus and plus 18 years of age) dependant on and returning together with their nuclear family (one or two parents); [iii]Mean (SD; range); [iv]Large-scale refugee reception centres and independent living housing with additional support.

Respondents were selected through purposive sampling (Neuman, 2006): all migrants who wanted to return with the support of Caritas International within the research period (January, 2010 – May, 2012) were asked to participate (n=109). The interviews took place in a separate room in the office of Caritas International after the migrant had signed up for the programme, so at the moment (s)he officially confirmed his/her decision to return within the voluntary return programme. Based on ethical considerations, we did not request participation of migrants suffering from a life-threatening disease (n=3) (e.g., cancer)or previously diagnosed with severe psychological problems (n=4). A further 17 possible participants could not be included for different reasons: the migrant returned before the interview took place (n=12), the returnee withdrew from the reintegration programme after returning to his country (n=2), or the selected participant was not willing to speak about the topic (n=3). In total, 85 interviews were conducted, representing in total 142 returning migrants (see table 4.1). Most respondents returned alone; half of all returnees were men returning single.

Within the latter, the vast majority migrated alone: although half were married or engaged at the moment they left the home country, their wives and children did accompany them. Those who returned alone and as bachelors, were mostly young men (average age 27.3 years at the moment of emigration). Ninety per cent of the respondents had asked for asylum upon arrival in Belgium. The large presence of asylum applicants in this group of returnees is most likely linked to the particular characteristics of the AVR programme (e.g., as the active promotion of the programme in asylum reception structures), the limited access to the programme for non-asylum seekers (Lietaert, Broekaert, & Derluyn, 2016), and the low recognition rates in Belgium of the asylum claims of Armenian and Georgian applicants[3]. Despite some tendencies, our participant group was highly heterogeneous in terms of age, migration motives (mentioning different motives such as safety, economic, political, health or family issues, or to gain experience), and the time lived in the host country before deciding to go back.

4.2.2 Data collection and analysis

In semi-structured qualitative interviews, the participants were asked to talk about their initial migration motives and experiences, their trajectories while in the host country (Belgium), their current living situation and their motives for deciding to return. The interviews were conducted under conditions of confidentiality and anonymity. Each respondent was informed about the study's content and objectives and gave oral informed consent; when permission was given, the conversation was recorded (n=50). Georgian (n=22), Armenian (n=28) and Russian (n=18) interpreters (on site or by telephone) were available when

participants could not speak the languages known by the interviewer (Dutch [n=7], French [n=8] and English [n=2]). Only adults were interviewed and when families or couples participated, they could freely choose who would answer questions. All interviews were literally transcribed, and thematic analyses (Howitt & Cramer, 2007) were carried out using the code-and-retrieve software programme NVivo 10 (Mortelmans, 2011). In a first step of the analytic process, the interview content was coded and divided into two broad themes in relation to our research aim: findings on the respondents' current living conditions in the host country as a factor potentially impacting on their return decision; and the respondents' perspectives on their return decision process. In a second step, the data were further analysed by recoding them under these themes and by determining, bottom-up, several overarching themes, which helped frame respondents' views on their return and the return decision process and the explicated motives.

4.3 Findings

4.3.1 Living conditions in the host country

The stories of the respondents revealed quite similar trajectories and living conditions in the host country, Belgium. Most respondents requested asylum upon arrival, which resulted in most (83.5 per cent of the entire group) living in a refugee reception centre from right after their arrival in Belgium. The other interviewees lived with family members or friends, in shelters or on the streets. During the time spend in Belgium, only eleven participants were able to work, mostly informally.

A the moment the decision to return was made, almost half of the respondents still lived in a reception structure for asylum applicants, providing them with some material support (food, shelter) up until their departure (see table 4.1). However, a sizeable group, and in particular those respondents whose asylum application had been rejected, had to move from the asylum reception structure to private housing, which they had to find most often within their own social network. Fifteen participants (10 adults, 5 children) lived in highly precarious conditions, residing on the streets or in a shelter for homeless people. Overall, the respondents' living conditions were characterized by constrained and difficult housing and financial situations, with limited social and economic participation in the host country's society, and often a gradual deterioration in their overall quality of life during their stay.

Although the respondents lived in a similar social and structural context, their evaluation of their life in Belgium differed widely. Some stressed the positive

elements, stating that they had been able to have a good life. However, most participants spoke of the difficulties of living in Belgium and referred to harsh living conditions (in the asylum centre or elsewhere), emotional stress and loneliness, health problems (e.g., high blood pressure, diabetes, hepatitis), the unpredictability of their situation, language barriers, and a lack of access to the job market and to medical and psychological care.

> “ I live in bad conditions here, more than one and a half years. I cannot find any job here, and it is also very difficult to find an apartment. To ask another person every day if you can stay there, that is also very difficult. It is immoral for me to live here like this, it is undignified. (Georgian man, 36 years)

4.3.2 Motives for returning

Table 4.2: Motives to return

Return motives
▪ Difficult living conditions Belgium ▪ Negative outcome asylum procedure ▪ Familial reason (e.g. feeling responsible for family in country of origin, missing family in country of origin, fear of losing tides with kin) ▪ Personal problems in country of origin solved ▪ Health issues (e.g. health problems solved in host country, not receiving treatment in the host country, fear of dying abroad) ▪ AVR support creates perspectives (e.g. possible to earn income due to support)

We clustered the motives underpinning respondents’ return decision six meaningful thematic groups and ordered them in table 4.2 according to the frequency of occurrence in respondents’ narratives. Most respondents mentioned one main motive that determined their return decision, though some described how a combination of two, three or even four reasons impacted on their decision to return. The vast majority of the respondents attributed their decision to return to difficult living conditions in Belgium (material and/or psychological challenges) and/or the negative outcome or lack of prospect with regards to their residence status.

> “ We did not work, we did not steal, so we don’t have money and so we don’t have food. We return voluntarily because we fear for our child, sometimes, she was really hungry, that can’t be, right? The last month was the most difficult month of our lives. (Georgian family with little child)

> I want to return because I already have one negative decision, and I think the second will be negative as well. I don't want to wait for that, I just want to go. It is pointless to stay any longer. (Georgian man, 38 years)

Returnees thus felt pressured by their current living circumstances and, in the absence of other acceptable alternatives, compelled to make the decision to return:

> Yes, on one side, it is voluntary, but on the other, actually I don't have any other possibility, do I? (Georgian man, 30 years)

Still, while some respondents explicitly said that they were returning against their will, others stressed that they themselves made the decision to return:

> Yes, it is only my own choice to return. I do not want to wait for papers, it is too long and too hard to get it. I think, I will probably never get it. (Georgian woman, 59 years)

> It is my own choice, I want to stop the procedure, my family is over there, I have to make a choice. (Georgian man, 37 years).

And sometimes, the decision was even taken against the advice of others:

> My two children are here and they say I don't have to go, but I want to return, I think it is better for me over there (Armenian man, 59 years).

Interestingly, some respondents who had the option to stay (i.e., they had a residence permit or evaluated their current living conditions in Belgium rather positively) also felt that they had no other choice than to return, forced by their health or their family situation (e.g., with elderly parents or children still living in the home country, they miss their family or fear to losing their emotional connection with them because of the long separation):

> I don't want to return at all, it is much better for me here, I don't want to return because I have nothing and no one there anymore, but I have no other choice. I can't stay here any longer, because this climate is bad for my health, I want to return. (Armenian woman, 63 years)

> I don't know if it will be safe for me when I return, but I have no other choice, otherwise I will lose my family. (Armenian man, 37 years)

This also became clear in the narrative of the only respondent with a definitive residence permit, who 'chose' to return because of mental health problems: he and his family had postponed the return as long as possible, but after eight years, the emotional burden was only getting worse, so they saw no other option than to return.

A range of different personal motives (e.g., ill health, familial situation, living conditions) was thus central in returnees' decision-making processes; none of the respondents mentioned an improved societal context in the home country as a reason to return. Some even judged they would now have more opportunities to build a life in their country of origin, in part because of the support provided by the AVR-programme.

4.3.3 The return decision process

The returnees also formed a heterogeneous group in terms of the time that they lived in the host country before they took the decision to return and in the way they made their return decision. For any of the different return motives, we found respondents who had made the decision to return rather quickly. This mostly followed a specific event, such as a rejection of their asylum request, loosing access to housing (e.g., because of a negative decision in their asylum procedure or because the people they lived with asked them to leave), or family members in the country of origin asking them to return urgently. Other respondents narrated about particular events that made them realize that returning to the country of origin was needed or possible. One returnee, who had lived for more than 10 years in different European countries without legal documents, told how he had never thought about returning until he received a 'wake-up call' from a priest, who reprimanded him that he was wasting his life and disappointing his parents by staying abroad. Another respondent decided to return when one of her acquaintances died, and she realized she did not want to die alone in a foreign country; given her age, she decided to return. Lastly, receiving information about the opportunities in the AVR programme was for some the trigger to make their decision:

> "I could not return home earlier, I had no work and no money, how could I pay for my ticket? Then, one time, a person told me that I could go to Caritas if I wanted to return, and gave me the address. (Armenian woman, 60 years)

For other participants, the decision to return was a gradual process, something they thought about for months or even years, or postponed for a long time until it seemed the best option or it became the only alternative:

> I got a negative answer in February, but I stayed. I decided that maybe I could stay and see if I could get married; but after some time, I decided to go back. (Armenian man, 24 years)

> We reflected a lot, we had a lot of stress. I lost 10 kilograms, because of the procedure, because of the negative decision, because of the stress. We have been thinking for a long time. (Armenian family with adult son).

> First, I was thinking 'maybe we should go back', and then I thought 'no, no, no!'. Then my wife was thinking 'maybe we should go back' and then she was thinking 'no, no, no!'. Two years, we were thinking about it. (Georgian family with little child)

Throughout the decision-making process, information about the possibility of receiving return support could be something the respondent had heard about quite some time ago, but used at the 'right' moment, when the decision to return was actually considered:

> When I just arrived, I stayed in a place for five days, before I could go to the reception centre. During that time, there were some other Armenians who were talking about Caritas, and they told me: if you have no place to go, you can go to Caritas. But I did not use this opportunity at that time. (Armenian man, 24 years)

Several respondents explained that they did not return because of the AVR support, but that the possibility of receiving support facilitated their decision. Yet, many respondents complained about the restricted amount of financial support they were offered,[4] which they considered insufficient to start up an income-generating activity. For others, the support was an important precondition for finally taking the decision return:

> We wanted to talk with Caritas first, and only after that go through with booking a flight with the social worker. We first wanted to be sure that Caritas would support us. (Armenian couple, 33 and 34 years)

Yet, a sizeable number of respondents doubted the authenticity of the support, despite being reassured several times by different social workers in Belgium about the project's trustworthiness:

> How can I trust this (Armenian) organization? Will I receive my money? Can they just conceal it? Can it happen they never report that I arrived in Armenia and contacted them? (Armenian family with two children)

4.3.4 Lived experiences of return

Finally, the diversity within the group was also reflected in the variety of returnees' feelings about their return: some returnees felt hopeful, happy or eager to return, often because of the prospect of being reunited with family and friends, given their decision the meaning of returning to a familiar and trusted environment. For others, their return was surrounded with negative feelings, such as fear because of unsolved problems, shame at returning or despondency about insecure future. Still others returned with mixed feelings: they felt relieved about returning, although knowing that their future living conditions would be worse than their current situation:

> It is good that I return, that I can be with my parents, that I can see my children, but it is also bad for me to return, as there is no work in Armenia. I don't have a job. (Armenian man, 54 years)

Without any doubt, taking the decision to return was hard and emotional. Some respondents spoke of their decision with conviction:

> It is better for me to go back, it is my country over there. In your head, you always stay with your family… Before, I have always worked, and now, I just sit here, it breaks my head, it is not good. It is good to return, that is not as difficult as sitting all the time. (Armenian family, with little child)

However, others harboured serious doubts, and sometimes postponed or even reversed their decision, and then renewed it later. Once the decision had finally been made, the migrants wanted to return as soon as possible, which means that they experienced the period between the application and the moment the return date was announced (always a minimum of three weeks) as highly stressful. Moreover, none of the participants considered it necessary or even possible to prepare for their return:

> I cannot think here, I cannot decide what to do while I am here, because everything changes so fast. I'll go back and see what works and what doesn't, and then make my choice. (Georgian man, 27 years)

4.4 Discussion

This study enlarges our insights into the decision-making processes and lived experiences of migrants who return 'voluntarily' to their country of origin within the framework of an AVR programme, and support social workers' interventions assisting their return.

Migrants returning within the framework of an AVR programme form a heterogeneous group in terms of both when and how the decision to return is made. Migrants return at different moments in their migration trajectory, adding to the body of knowledge that counteracts the argument that the longer rejected asylum seekers stay in the host country, the less likely it is that they will return on a voluntary basis (Leerkes & Boersema, 2014). Further, our findings reveal the highly personal nature of the return decision process (Black *et al.*, 2004), with a range of factors influencing the decision to return and those factors only receiving their value when considered in light of the perspectives and experiences of the migrants themselves.

Yet, some tendencies can be discerned. The respondents' stories highlight the huge impact on their decision of their living conditions in Belgium and the absence of a residence permit, and any expectations of getting one, together with the impact of particular familial and life cycle factors (e.g., age) (Black *et al.*, 2004; Leerkes, Galloway, & Kromhout, 2011). In contrast, the impact of factors in the home country (e.g., political (in)stability, economic difficulties or personal safety), is relatively small, with differs from previous studies that return motives of potential returnees (migrants who had not yet decided to return) are mainly influenced by non-economic factors and by factors in the country of origin, and not by their legal status (Black *et al.*, 2004). Importantly, particular factors, such as familial expectations and health conditions, also impacted on returnees' decision processes, and were often experienced as factors of high 'force'.

This significant role of the host country's living conditions and migrants' legal status in returnees' decision processes, together with other 'forcing' factors, adds to arguments questioning the 'voluntariness' of 'voluntary return' (Blitz *et al.*, 2005; Ruben, van Houte, & Davids, 2009; Webber, 2011). The (sometimes gradual) changes in returnees' living conditions or their constrained legal status seriously limited their choices , forcing them to *choose* to return in an attempt to find a less painful alternative to a living situation of continued destitution or the risk of forced repatriation (Webber, 2011). The label 'voluntary return' is thus far more a state-centric approach, prioritized by governments in the framing of their policy for collaborating international organizations and the wider public (Noll, 1999).

Although framing the return as 'voluntary' largely diverges from the language and experiences of migrants themselves (Cassarino, 2008; Noll, 1999), it is equally important to note that labelling our respondents' return processes as 'forced return' is problematic as well. We thus argue that the continuum from 'voluntary' to 'forced' should be considered more as a multi-layered concept in which elements of force and choice closely interact in complex and varying ways. Some participants, for example, stressed that they made the decision to return themselves, while mentioning at the same time that the host country's circumstances, in combination with other elements, *forced* them to this decision. Labelling the return as 'a choice' by returnees can (as well) be regarded as an act of performativity (Butler, 1993), as a way of coping with the failure of the migration project and in an attempt to maintain their dignity, as a way to rationalize the decision and to make sense of the return process (Cornish, Peltzer, & MacLachlan, 1999). The return itself can also be a strategy to improve returnees' own wellbeing and regain control over their lives (Stein & Cuny, 1994), and thus experienced, despite strong elements of force or without any 'desire' to return, as a positive, 'voluntary' choice. Migrants' individual choices and agency should thus not be overlooked, since even in a context of highly limited choices, they keep on struggling to maintain space for personal decision-making (Turton, 2003; Zimmermann, 2012).

This experience of their return as a personal choice does not always correspond with a positive view on this new migration (Leerkes *et al.*, 2011). As much as in other migration processes, returning to the home country is also often a highly ambiguous experience (Cornish *et al.*, 1999), containing both positive and negative aspects, leading to mixed feelings of fear ànd hope, and loss ànd gain and is often experienced as a *new* migration process (Métraux, 2011). This adds once more to scholars arguing against the conceptualization of return migration as a 'simple' 'homecoming' or as a return to the familiar and comfortable context one belongs to (Hammond, 1999; Ruben *et al.*, 2009). Further, the respondents view on return migration contrasts a view on voluntary migration as a 'safe' or 'easy' form of migration, without any detrimental consequences for migrants' wellbeing (Vathi & Duci, 2016). We thus argue that when considering return migration as a new migration, support practices for returnees should try to enhance greater continuity in people's lives, giving attention to elements such as the returnee's farewell process (also for the children involved), material objects people can take with them, and processes to try to align migrants' aspirations and expectations with their (imagined) realities. Our interviews also showed, however, that returnees often do not prefer to spend time preparing for their return and want to leave as fast as possible. More research is needed to clarify this contradiction and to explore how social workers can deal with the tensions arising (Gmelch, 1980). The availability of AVR support did sometimes facilitate the decision process to

return and was generally considered to have added value to restarting life after return (IOM, 2010). Yet several respondents doubted whether the amount of support would meet their needs (Ruben *et al.*, 2009). This suggests a need for social workers to reflect with returnees on their expectations of the post-return reality, in relation to the AVR reintegration support (Carr, 2014; DRC, 2008). At the same time, we should also question current return migration policy on the type and amount of reintegration support that is provided and how this is portrayed to (potential) returnees.

To conclude, our findings indicate that return migration should be regarded, firstly, as a situated concept, framed in and impacted by situational and contextual factors, and receiving its specific meaning from the returning individuals' points of view (Long and Oxfeld, 2004; Turton, 2003), and, secondly, as a new migration process, in both respects furthering our understanding of the return decision process and returnees' lived experiences. In this regard, dichotomous thinking in terms of a forced-voluntary distinction (Noll 1999; Van Hear *et al*., 2000) often directly related to returnees' legal status, does not reflect returnees' experiences and multidimensional, nuanced views on the 'voluntary' and 'forced' character of their return, and denies the reality of their making a 'constrained choice' to return. Acknowledging this mixture of aspects in the processes supporting returnees would open up more opportunity to support (potential) returnees' agency and dignity (Vathi & Duci, 2016), and as such increase their overall wellbeing.

4.4.1 Limitations

When interpreting the findings, the following limitations of the study need to be acknowledged. First, our focus on migrants returning within a voluntary return and reintegration programme limits the findings to this particular group, while other groups, such as migrants returning without support or only with a flight ticket, are not included. Second, language and cultural barriers between researcher and respondents might have impacted on the data collection (van de Vijver & Leung, 1997), although the use of interpreters helped to reduce these barriers. Third, the country-specific approach does not allow direct generalizations of the findings to other countries, though they may indicate similarities with other groups of returnees.

Notes

1. As long as an asylum request is pending, asylum applicants receive a temporary residence permit. This permit ends when the migrant's application is rejected; he/she then receives an order to leave the territory (Kruispunt Migratie-Integratie, 2015).

2. The Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum-Seekers in Belgium introduced new admission criteria for the AVR programme in 2012 (Fedasil, 2012). All respondents applied for AVR support before these new criteria came into force.
3. Asylum requests and granted refugee statuses of Armenian nationalities in Belgium: in 2009: 1099 (5th out place of all asylum applications) – 6 received refugee status; in 2010: 986 – 4 received refugee status; in 2011: 691 – 4 received refugee status. For Georgia, the numbers were as follows: in 2009: 327 asylum applications – 3 received refugee status; in 2010: 323 applications – 6 received refugee status; in 2011: 324 applications – 1 received refugee status (CGVS, 2015).
4. The reintegration support the respondents received varied between a minimum of 500 and a maximum of 2,700 euros for a person returning single.

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5
A longitudinal study of the lived realities of returnees*

*Based on Lietaert, I., Broekaert, E., & Derluyn, I. (in preparation). A longitudinal study of the lived realities of returnees.

Abstract

Although voluntary return of migrants is strongly encouraged by West-European migration policies, little evidence exists about the lived realities of returnees, especially from longitudinal perspective. Applying a longitudinal, two-years research design to observe dynamic changes in the lives of 65 returnees, this article documents returnees' self-assessments of their lived realities and the pivotal domains herein. The analysis revealed the complex, multidimensional and dynamic character of post-return situations, with, at the same time, contrasts between the themes, demonstrating ambiguity and diversity in return experiences. These findings argue that return support needs to be flexible and consider returnees' views and return contexts.

5.1 Introduction

Over the last three decades, there has been an increasing emphasis in migration policy on the voluntary return[1] of migrants from West-European countries to their country of origin, and on the development of policy measures to encourage and stimulate return, focusing in particular on the return of asylum seekers, rejected asylum seekers, and undocumented migrants (Cassarino, 2008; Ghosh, 2000; Matrix Insight, 2012). Despite the large policy focus on voluntary return and the increasing number of migrants returning with governmental support (IOM, 2012; Thiel & Gillan, 2010), there is a paucity of evidence about the perspectives and lived realities of returnees (Black *et al*., 2004; Carr, 2014; Cassarino, 2008; Zimmermann, 2012), thereby increasing the risk of policy responses being set "without listening to and so properly responding to the needs of these as individuals" (Zimmermann, 2000, p. 55).

Policy responses – as also research – on return processes have been largely dominated by the 'sedentarist paradigm' (Eastmond, 2001; Malkki, 1992), which considers return migration to be "an act of unproblematic and natural reinsertion in the local or national community once left behind" (Markowitz & Stefansson, 2004, p. 5). However, scholars have indicated that returning 'home' or returning to the 'homeland' is not a simple homecoming or return to a familiar and comfortable context one belongs to (D'Onofrio, 2004; Eastmond, 2001; Ghanem, 2003; Hammond, 1999). Changes in both the home country and the returnee make a return process in fact an arrival at a new place (Hammond, 1999; Ruben, Van Houte, & Davids, 2009), which is sometimes even experienced as worse than the initial migration (Black & Gent, 2006; Markowitz & Stefansson, 2004). Further, return does not necessarily mark the permanent end of people's migration process (Black & Koser, 1999; Black *et al*., 2004; Ruben *et al*., 2009). Although caution is required against an over-normalization of mobility and transnationalism, and also permanent returns (desired or forced) exist (Jeffery & Murison, 2011; Markowitz & Stefansson, 2004; Sinatti, 2011), return needs to be conceived as a movement within ongoing spatial mobility (Eastmond, 2006; King, 2000; Ruben *et al.*, 2009), and return processes should not be conceptualized as 'natural', 'unproblematic', or 'static' phenomena, but as multi-phased, multi-layered, complex, and contested processes and experiences (Black *et al*., 2004; King, 2000; Markowitz & Stefansson, 2004; Ruben *et al.*, 2009), which require time (Cassarino, 2014) or sometimes never end (Ghanem, 2003). Subscribing this conceptualization of return processes, we first review the literature on returnees' post-return situations, before turning to our study.

5.1.1 The post-return situation: Evidence from previous studies

The largest body of empirical research on the post-return situation of asylum seekers, rejected asylum seekers, and undocumented migrants returning voluntarily, both with and without support, investigates whether these post-return situations are 'sustainable' (Black *et al*., 2004; Riiskjaer & Nielsson, 2008; Thiel & Gillan, 2010) or 'embedded' returns (Ruben *et al.*, 2009; Carr, 2014), as reflected in different life domains and measured through both socio-economic indicators and returnees' subjective perspectives (Black *et al*., 2004; Davids & Van Houte, 2008; Thiel & Gillan, 2010). These studies, all based on cross-sectional quantitative and qualitative data, sketch a rather negative image: returnees' primary challenge concerns establishing a material base of living (Pedersen, 2003), a process that often turns out to be difficult. Ruben and colleagues (2009) analysed the situation of 178 returnees in six different countries and concluded that only a few returnees were capable of creating an independent livelihood. A vital factor influencing returnees' post-return situations is the context of the home country. Poor political, economic, and social infrastructure in the country of origin, lack of access to housing and employment, and feeling unsafe owing to material insecurity and instability complicate the return process (Black *et al.*, 2004; Riiskjaer & Nielsson, 2008; Thiel & Gillan, 2010; Van Houte & De Koning, 2008).

Further, many returnees lack or lose access to local and transnational social ties (Riiskjaer & Nielsson, 2008; Thiel & Gillan, 2010), inhibiting returnees' ability to create a home and feel accepted, since social networks are indispensable sources of material and emotional support (Pedersen, 2003; Ruben *et al.*, 2009; Thiel & Gillan, 2010). Yet, Davids and Van Houte (2008) argued that these social networks often only gave emotional support, and that only returnees from privileged socio-economic backgrounds had access to social relations which could help to create a livelihood, such as employment (Pedersen, 2003; Van Houte & De Koning, 2008).

Accordingly, questions arise about returnees' feelings of belonging to the country of origin; yet here, empirical evidence is less consistent. According to Pedersen (2003), returnees' primary concerns relate to their material living conditions, and questions of identity and belonging only gain importance once a material base of living is well established. To the contrary, other scholars point to the primary importance of feelings of non-belonging amongst returnees (Riiskjaer & Nielsson, 2008), or, in contrast, indicate that the material hardships returnees are confronted with do not prevent almost two thirds of the respondents from feeling at home after their return (Van Houte & De Koning, 2008).

Although this body of research exposes the substantial and often neglected difficulties faced by returnees, thereby countering the aforementioned 'home-

coming approach', these studies often start from pre-defined domains that seem to be important for a successful return, possibly overlooking what migrants themselves identify as crucial factors impacting their post-return situation. This paper therefore starts from a broad perspective on post-return situations, going beyond externally identified domains to explore post-return processes (Wright, 2012), through shifting the analytic attention to returnees' self-assessment of their post-return situations and the domains within it that they consider important. Studies have up till now also paid little attention to the dynamic interplay between and evolution within different domains, the way returnees balance them against each other, and the overall evolution of post-return situations. We have therefore executed the first study in which post-return situations have been followed up longitudinally, in order to observe possible dynamic changes and to provide insight into the rich complexity of individuals' lives (Alcock, 2004).

This research aims to address existing empirical gaps concerning the lived realities of returnees by examining which domains influence returnees' evaluation of their post-return situation, and, secondly, how this evaluation evolves in a longitudinal perspective. These insights into returnees' lived realities and experiences may also help towards recognizing their needs better, and thus in developing return support measures that are better adapted to these needs and lived realities (Hammond, 1999; Zimmermann, 2000).

5.2 Methods

5.2.1 Participants

Data were collected through a follow-up of migrants who returned from Belgium to the republics of Armenia and Georgia during the initial two years after their return. We asked all Armenian and Georgian migrants who returned with return and reintegration support from the Belgian assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programme within the research period (January 2010 – May 2012)[2] to participate to the study. Eighty-five 'returning units' (representing a single migrant, a couple, or a family) agreed to participate before their departure, of whom we could effectively follow up 65[3] over a period of two years, interviewing them within the first year after return and within the second year after return. These 65 return units represent 114 persons (male: n=54; female: n=34, children (less than 18 years) accompanying their parents: n=23 and adolescents (18 years and over) accompanying their parents: n=8), with an average age of 32.2 years (SD=18.3, range 0.4-72.3) (table 5.1). In the case of families, we interviewed at least one adult member during each interview.

We opted for a country-specific approach, given that careful contextualization is needed to make an in-depth exploration of post-return situations (Huttunen, 2010). The study setting, the two neighbouring countries Armenia and Georgia, was chosen because both countries are characterized by a high emigration rate, which has markedly intensified over recent decades (ETF, 2013; Gevorkyan, Marshuryan, & Gevorkyan, 2006; Hofmann & Buckley, 2012). Natural disasters, armed conflicts and the socio-political crisis after the collapse of the Soviet Union led to the departure of many Armenians and Georgians in the late 1990s (Badurashvili, 2004; Gevorkyan *et al.*, 2006; Hofmann & Buckley, 2012). Currently, both countries are still recovering from the hard years following their independence, and a poor socio-economic situation, high poverty levels, unaffordable or unavailable healthcare, and unstable political conditions still form important causes of emigration, mainly to Russia, but because of increasing discriminatory acts against migrants from Caucasus countries in Russia, also to Western Europe and elsewhere (Bakhshinyan, 2014; ETF, 2013; Falkingham, 2005; Ishkanian, 2002; Roman, 2002). For most migrants, migration to Russia is mainly temporary, while migration to Europe is intended to be permanent, with emigrants often taking their families with them (Bakhshinyan, 2014). The majority of the Armenians and Georgians who migrate to Europe ask for asylum, though asylum recognition rates are very low, and most are thus not allowed to stay permanently (Bakhshinyan, 2014; EMN, 2009). Further, the overall number of assisted returns to Armenia from various host countries has been quite stable during the last decade, though the number of migrants returning to Georgia has fluctuated, with a recent peak in 2013 of 1,157 returnees (11th highest number of AVR returns) (IOM, 2014). In the period from 2000 to 2013, respectively 6,627 (21st place) and 7,352 (16th place) migrants returned from various host countries to Armenia and Georgia, quite a high number given their small populations (respectively 2,976,566 and 4,476,900 in 2013 [World Bank, 2014]).

Although generalizations out of this country-specific approach need to be made with care, the results can give insight into post-return processes in other countries, or may act as comparative case studies for return processes in other regions, such as North Africa, the Middle East, and the Balkan region (Black *et al.*, 2004; Bloemraad, 2013; De Bree, Davids, & De Haas, 2010; Huttunen, 2010; Pedersen, 2003; Riiskjaer & Nielsson, 2008). Without aiming to compare regions in this study, we will present some first impressions about possible differences from other country-specific research.

Table 5.1: Profile of the respondents [i]

	Total number of research units (n = 65)	%
Migration motives [ii]		
Personal safety	20	32.8
Economic motives	14	23.0
Political motives	12	19.7
Health issues	10	16.4
Family issues	4	6.6
Adventure / experience	1	1.6
Family composition		
Single	42	64.6
Couple	7	10.8
Family	16	24.6
Marital status		
Single	12	18.5
Engaged/married	43	66.2
Divorced/separated	3	4.6
Widow(er)	7	10.8
Status when returning		
Residence permission	1	1.5
Ongoing asylum application	20	30.8
Rejected asylum application	38	58.5
Never asked for asylum	6	9.2
Return motives [iii]		
Difficult living conditions Belgium	36	37.1
Negative outcome asylum procedure	22	21.6
Familial reason	21	5.2
Personal problems in country of origin solved	9	22.7
Health issues	5	9.3
AVRR support creates perspectives	4	4.1
Time abroad (n=65) (months)[iv]	29.4 (38.2; 2-172)	
Time in Belgium (n=65) (months)[iv]	19.5 (19.9 ; 1- 132)	

[i] Information in this table is based on the 65 'returning units' (persons, couples or families) included in this study; [ii] Motives for leaving the home country; valid cases N=59; multiple answers possible; 2 respondents gave two motives for migrating; [iii] Motives for returning to the home country; valid cases N=64; multiple answers possible; 37 respondents gave one motive, 22 gave two motives, 4 three and 1 participant mentioned four motives for returning; [iv] Mean (SD; range).

5.2.2 Data collection

The data were collected during several field visits over a four-year period (2010-2013). Using open-ended questions, participants were asked to talk about their post-return situations, giving their own perspectives. If needed, questions were added on a range of different topics (such as overall living situation, personal situation, income, job, health, feelings, and social contacts). This open interview

approach was used in the first (within one year after return) and the second interview (within two years after return), and completed with additional questions on participants' comparison of their current situation with the time before migration, and, during the second interview, with their situation a year ago. Each respondent was asked to indicate an overall evaluation of their current situation on a scale from one (very bad) to five (very good), as a gateway to talking about how their living situation had evolved. We then requested them to explain why they had chosen a certain score and what influenced this figure. Four participants, however, could not indicate an overall figure, leading to a final number of 61 trajectories included in the longitudinal analysis.

The interviews were held at a location chosen by the respondents, either in a public place or at their house. Some interviews (n=8) were conducted without an interpreter (in Dutch, French, or English), but in most interviews (n=122), respondents preferred the support of an interpreter (Armenian, Georgian, or Russian). Research aims and conditions of anonymity and confidentiality were clarified at the beginning of each interview, and after receiving the interviewee's oral informed consent, the interview started.

5.2.3 Analysis

All interviews were audiotaped and literally transcribed. In the case of translated interviews, only the translation was transcribed, though several parts, both questions and answers, were retranslated afterwards in an attempt to minimize translation inaccuracy and biased responses (Edwards, 1998; Jacobsen & Landau, 2003). In a first step, the interviews were analysed thematically (Howitt & Cramer, 2007) using NVivo (QSR International Pty Ltd. Version 10), a software application for qualitative data analysis, in order to reveal the themes that were central in the respondents' narratives. During this process, memos were compiled about possible relationships between the different themes.

In a second step, in order to capture the perspectives of the returnees on the evolution of their post-return situations, we looked at the consecutive scores the respondents had assigned to their situation. This revealed 21 different trajectories in the overall situation, which we clustered into three meaningful patterns: improvement, decline, and no change. The data were then analysed by group: we further explored the respondents' perspectives on the different central themes within each cluster, thereby mainly focusing on dynamics, changes, and reasons for change.

5.2.4 Limitations

This research approach clearly has important limitations. First, although the use of interpreters helped to overcome both language and cultural barriers between researcher and respondents (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003), we had to work with several interpreters in each country (because of the long period of data collection and the respondents' different mother tongues), which diminished the similarities in the translations (Edwards, 1998). However, this was partially solved through asking other interpreters to translate parts of the interview for a second time, in order to ensure the quality of the translations. A second limitation is the specificity of the participant group (migrants returning with AVRR support from Belgium to the countries Georgia and Armenia), which limits the generalizability of the study findings to other groups and countries. Third, the drop-out rate we were faced with might have impacted our findings, given that those respondents who dropped out could have had particular lived realities and views that might have differ from those covered in our study. Finally, although this research realized a quite unique mid-term longitudinal follow-up of returnees, going beyond a static, single measurement moment of return processes, our follow-up was relatively short, in particular because we know that the impact of migration processes can take up to ten to fifteen years to eventuate (Rogge, 1994). A continued long-term follow-up of returnees' post-return experiences over a longer period of time could therefore enlarge our insights into the dynamics of return processes.

5.3 Findings

5.3.1 Central domains shaping returnees' evaluations

When asked to evaluate their post-return situation, all respondents mentioned their material situation, in particular income (sufficient to maintain the family) and housing (a stable and suitable living place), as an extremely important and determining issue (Pedersen, 2003). Both objectives were said to be difficult to realize within the socio-economic context of low wages and high unemployment:

> "I need to earn enough money. This is not only my problem, but the problem of all Armenians. If you find a job here, you earn very little, it is very little to manage to survive. I earn 200 euro, I can pay for the apartment and the electricity with that, and that's it, it is finished. (female; 34; 2)[4]

Their evaluation of their (1) material situation did not, though, represent the complete picture and did not translate directly into the overall appraisal of their

situation (Bartram, 2013). Other themes that recurred throughout their stories as being very influential are presented below, each time accompanied by examples or illustrative quotes:

(2) the context of the home country: the respondents distinguished between the economic situation (e.g., (un)employment, wages, living standard, and buying power); the political situation (e.g., governance, infrastructure, social support, corruption, instability, and discrimination); and the general culture in the country of origin (e.g., the absence of punctuality or politeness, the presence of strong social bounds);
(3) social network: the retrieval of connections with the supportive networks of family and friends or the heavy burden of separation – "It is an advantage for me to live together with my relatives" (male; 32; 2); "I am not able to see my children, I miss them so much." (male; 54; 1);
(4) belonging to, or the benefit of being in, one's country/environment: "This is my country, this is my life. This is everything for me. I belong here." (male; 37; 2);
(5) people's physical and mental health: "I don't know if it is due to the climate or the medication, but there is a positive change in my health" (female; 61; 1); "I feel very bad when the pressure on me is very high." (female; 48; 1);
(6) people's mood, feelings of agency, and perspectives on the future: "I feel so tired" (female; 67; 1); "We are trying to do everything to overcome our difficulties. We have a positive approach to things." (male; 36; 2);
(7) the migration experience: "I lost years due to the migration. I had no chance to work" (male; 38; 2); "I have seen so many things over there." (male; 29; 1); and
(8) the reintegration support received:[5] "The support really helped me a lot" (male; 22; 1); "I appreciate the help, but the support is not enough to create an income." (male; 52; 2).

The stories of the returnees, on the one hand, confirmed that the different themes were strongly interwoven: "It is a chain, everything is together" (male; 25; 2) (see also the longitudinal analysis below). On the other hand, through asking the respondents to evaluate their overall situation, the contrast that often occurred between different themes was clearly revealed as well. It exposed the inherent ambiguity in how returnees experienced their post-return situation. Some respondents therefore indicated it was impossible to give one overall score,

because they want to mark their material situation much lower than what they called their 'mood' or 'attitude':

> If we can put the financial issues aside, I am satisfied, I am very satisfied. But if you put the financial issues inside, I am not satisfied. Everybody wants to live in his own country, in his motherland. But when there are no means of living, when people are living in bad conditions, how to live? How can a person be satisfied with this? But of course it is good to be in your own country. (male; 28; 2)

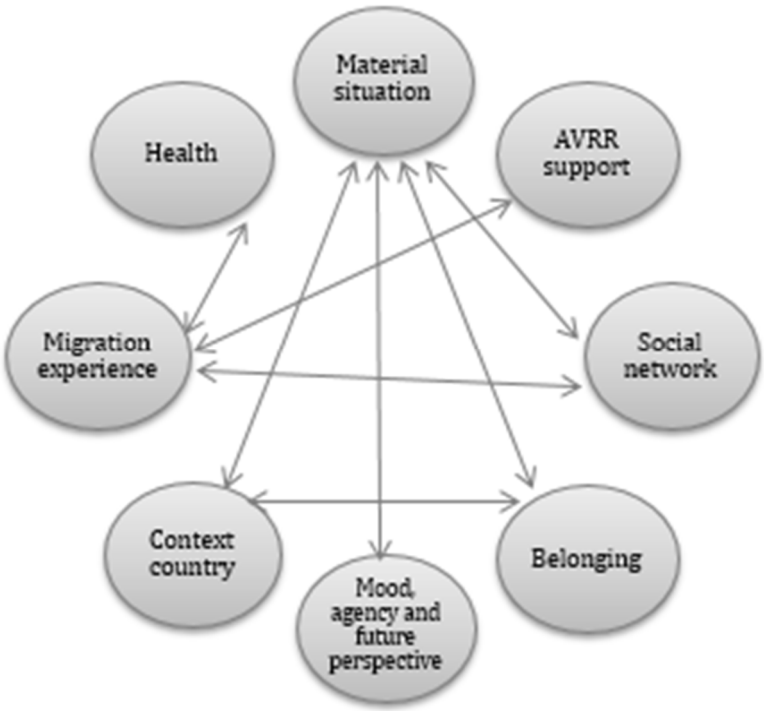
> The financial situation is 2. But my attitude, my interest in increasing the income is 5. This because I like to do many things. Everything depends on money. Just now, I don't have enough money to increase the income, to enlarge the business, but when I have that money, everything will be ok. […] I feel that I am able to do these things. (male; 33; 2)

Besides the contrast between material conditions and the experience of belonging or agency as described in the two quotes above, other respondents talked about contradictions (see figure 5.1) between:

- material conditions and the situation in the country of origin: "Life in general in Armenia is getting worse, but for me personally it became better." (female; 53; 1);
- social network and the migration experience: "I don't regret being there, but I regret it for another reason. Because I went abroad, I have no wife, no children. But it was good." (male; 32; 1);
- migration experience and health: "I couldn't stand the climate [in Belgium], my health is better here, though I love Belgium and I wish I was there." (female; 63; 1);
- belonging and the context of the home country: "The solution to my problems is to leave this country, though I don't want to live abroad. I ask God to change the situation here, so we don't have to go." (female; 26; 1);
- social network and material conditions: "Life is difficult, but when you are surrounded by your family, it is good." (female; 33; 1);
- reintegration support and migration experience: "We had a difficult time in Belgium and I lost a lot of money for the tickets, but the positive thing is the assistance that was given to us." (male; 27; 1).

The experience of similar contradictions sometimes resulted in a different overall score, indicating that different meanings can be attributed to similar situations, and that an overall evaluation is highly individual (Diener & Suh, 1997).

Figure 5.1: Contrasts between central domains shaping returnees' evaluations



5.3.2 Longitudinal analysis of the post-return situation

A longitudinal analysis of returnees' lived realities provides a useful framework for exploring the changes and dynamics in migrants' post-return situations. The initial weeks after the return were experienced in very diverse ways: for some respondents, the first weeks after return were very difficult, while for others, it was an easy process – and these experiences seemed not to be connected to the time the returnee had spent abroad. Despite the confrontation with difficulties, such as feeling confused, experiencing problems to orientate or to adapt to the specific 'cultural' context and living conditions, most still described the warm feeling of being reunited with friends and family and indicated that both the negative and positive experiences after some months 'normalized':

> "After return, at first we could not get orientated as to what to do, what would happen to us. At first, it was not easy, but as we are used to living here, we could find ourselves. (male; 53; 2)

> [Y]ou missed your family and they missed you, you missed the place where you lived. But in one month, it was clear, this situation was ending, you cannot keep on saying 'oh, we missed you, I missed you.' After one month, it was normal again. (male; 38; 1)

Besides these rapid changes in the immediate aftermath of their return, many respondents indicated that during the first year, it was unclear how to evaluate their situation. Many emphasized that the process was "ongoing", "it is only the start-up now" and "it needs more time". We will therefore explore in the next section the changes that occurred in the themes explored between the first and second year after return. The empirical data were clustered around the three main trajectories: an improvement of participants' overall situation, a decline, and an unchanged situation.

5.3.2.1 Improvement

The largest group of respondents reported an improvement in their situation, ranging from reporting small progress to describing remarkable advance. An improvement was in many cases ascribed to an improvement in (the stability of) their material situation, mainly due to the starting-up or progression of an income-generating activity, often combined with temporary or informal jobs. Many respondents showed huge creativity in being able to turn their situation around, using a 'patchwork strategy' (Kibria, 1994) in which they brought together several economic resources, through combining two or three jobs. Others solved the financial difficulties of the first year by working abroad and going back-and-forth between, in these particular cases, Russia or Italy and their home country (Isaakyan, 2013).

Secondly, for respondents with medical problems, (the prospect of) receiving treatment led to the improvement in their situation. And, thirdly, some respondents reported an improvement in their situation due to a change of government. Particularly for respondents who were politically active, this meant beneficial personal connections with their local government and some material benefits; for others, the change of ruling party led to a more general feeling of safety, trust, and the prospect of positive change, which, although their material situation had not changed, generated a feeling of greater wellbeing:

> We are in the same situation, nothing has changed for me now. But I am on the prime minister's side, we all choose sides here in Georgia, and I believe that maybe one year is not enough, and maybe after one year, or two years, it will be possible for him to bring some changes. (male; 34; 1)

With regard to these trajectories of improvement, some remarks need to be made. First, as expressed by one respondent, the satisfaction with one's material situation is personal, and the improvement of the post-return situation needs to be put into perspective:

> Saying that the income is enough, that is relative. If you come and see my house, it is not renovated, these are not good circumstances to live. So of course, it is relative, just I am trying to get it better, to make it work. (male; 33; 2)

This quote shows, as was the case for quite a few respondents in this group, there were no big improvements in their material situation, but there was a prominent change in their feelings of agency, of being in control of their situation, feelings of having the ability, or seeing the opportunity, to make progress: "[I earn little] but it is better because I am managing by my own way" (female; 64; 2). Moreover, respondents pointed to the emotional benefit of being active, having the opportunity to do something, or of being proud of their achievements and that they were able to take care of relatives: "I am helping my family now. I like to work and to have a job. I can't sit at home and do nothing." (female; 58; 2).

The relativity of the improvement is, though, also shown in the contradictions that stay present in returnees' evaluations:

> Now it is better here, there is a different prime minister, it is better than last year. (...) It did not actually change that much, for the people, it has not changed yet. (…) Still there is fear that maybe one day, something will happen, so it is difficult. Even though the government has changed, still there is fear. (male; 46; 2)

Second, the lived realities of the returnees show that the reported improvements are also precarious, mainly due to the unstable political and economic context. Jobs leading to improvement were mainly temporary, and material benefits out of political connections might turn into an unsafe personal situation if the local authorities were to change again:

> [Our situation] depends on whether my husband has a job outside the country or not, if he visits Moscow or someplace else, at that time, we live normally. But when we don't have the ability to go abroad, it is very bad. (female; 34; 2)

This precariousness of the respondents' post-return situation is also illustrated by the returnees who reported a decline in their wellbeing, which we will explore in the next section.

5.3.2.2 Decline

The respondents who reported a decline after two years, gave an average or above-average evaluation score to their situation during the first interview one year after return. At that time, though, their situation was also typified by both negative (e.g., unavailability of medicines, difficulties to gain income, corruption) and positive elements (e.g., reunion with family, feeling of belonging or being more free). A decline seemed to appear when after two years the difficulties started to overshadow the benefits of the return, or when people were confronted with a reverse process: the income appeared to be insufficient owing to rising prices, medical problems, or misfortune. The following two quotes show how a respondent (female; 30) described a difficult situation in the first interview, but had very hopeful perspectives. Yet one year later, this feeling of agency disappeared, leading her to conclude that living on the streets in Belgium appeared more attractive than a post-return situation without any perspective:

> *Interview one year after return*: Everything is normal. We are living average. Not bad and not so good, so average […] Our situation before migration was much better. We had animals, and we had the resources to rent a house and to live separately from the parents. Now, we cannot, and we have to live with them, we have no resources, we have no way to earn an income by ourselves. But through the support, we can do this now, and we can return to a normal way of living.
>
> *Interview two years after return*: The cattle we had were damaged last year. One of the animals lost the calf. (...) The situation turns worse because all prices are rising, all costs have increased, so that is why these two cows are very little profit for us. (...) I regret my return, we did not have a house or a job [in Belgium], but the situation was better than now here.

Within this group, people often expressed their disappointment in and frustrations with the economy or the mentality of their country of origin, which was hampering their possibilities.

> "No, [the income] is not enough to survive. I have no house. Even if I work 100 years, I will not be able to buy myself a house here. If I work the same in Europe, I think I can manage. (male; 43; 2)

> Look… it is just difficult to live here, I don't even mean to live 'normal', I mean it is difficult to live 'a little bit normal'. There is corruption everywhere … although there is a lot of money in Armenia, it is owned by a very small group. (male; 29; 2)

5.3.2.3 Unchanged situation

Within this group, we noted huge differences, given that an unchanged situation can refer to an unchanged average situation, an unchanged bad situation or an unchanged good situation. Those returnees who described an unchanged average situation expressed similar lived realities in the first year after return to those respondents who reported a decline: a situation characterized by contradictory positive and negative elements. Yet, interesting here is that this group could stay in this average situation, because they were still experiencing several elements that could counterbalance the difficulties they were confronted with, such as a prevailing feeling of belonging or a strong social network:

> Without the financial part, we are very satisfied. Our home is here. It is different when you are not in your home country. If someone is in trouble the first person who come to help is the neighbour, they are even closer than relatives. (male; 36; 2)

Others reported an unchanged average situation because they found some solution to their problems, for example, by engaging in labour migration to Russia. And again others, mainly elderly people, reported that nothing really changes in one year's time. Finally, some respondents explained that the lack of opportunities in their country "kept" them in an average situation, although they really wanted to move forward:

> Not much has changed … my wife began to work and I am working and it is like … We don't have much problems now. The only problem is that [Georgia] is not stable. You are doing something, but you don't know why you are doing it here. If you do the same in another country, it would be much better, because here, you can lose everything just like that. (male; 22; 2)

For the respondents who reported an unchanged bad situation, it was from the beginning impossible to earn a sufficient income. Although they were occupied with different kinds of 'survival strategies' (Bernabè, 2002), these were insufficient to cover daily living costs, and the respondents saw no possibility of improvement or change, leading for some of them to hard situations of poverty:

> My situation is difficult. I am not young anymore, and I lost everything. I have problems every day to be able to just buy the basic things for living. When I need to go to a hospital for my medical needs and I am not earning enough money to pay for my rent, I will stay on the streets. (male; 59; 2)

Health problems were overall an important theme in respondents' lived realities: many returnees in this group had chronic medical problems for which they could not afford treatment, which put severe pressure on their financial situation (Bakhshinyan, 2014). Equally, several expressed a feeling of depression, certainly when they felt out of control over their situation:

> We are at one straight road and we are only going down, going down, going down, only waiting for this point when we fall off. We tried so many different ways to earn money, only earn money, but we don't see how we can manage. (female; 34; 2)

Others expressed feelings of anger with their government, for leaving them to their fate or even preventing them from living a normal life. To live with a constant fear of injustice and arbitrariness, with a constant feeling of insecurity, weighed heavily, even inducing feelings that they no longer wanted to belong to this country:

> We are living in a country without laws. I have been very anxious. Even if my husband says he likes his country, I am very, very disappointed in my country. In the authorities, in the laws, in the hardship we have here. (female; 48; 1)

> It is our president who said that we have no problems in our country, so that is why you can send our citizens back. If he says such things, why isn't he taking care of us then? We have returned already! (male; 58; 1)

> Even as a soldier in Afghanistan, psychologically, I was quieter than here. I was at ease, because I knew why I was there, what I had to do, and what to expect. […] Even living in the streets in Belgium, you feel more protected. You know that police is police, and that they will protect you. (male; 37; 1)

Lastly, at the complete opposite end of the spectrum, we find respondents who evaluate their situation as 'unchanged, but good'. Most already had a sufficient income one year after return and could continue their activities in the same way: "Last year was just the start, now it goes well, we have more customers" (male;

30; 2); or they had family members who were able to give them additional support.

5.4 Discussion and conclusion

Research on post-return situations has revealed several difficulties returnees are confronted with upon return, thereby bringing into question the notion of an easy and natural home-coming model. Yet, less attention has been paid to what migrants themselves identify as the crucial factors that impact their post-return situations, and the dynamic interplay between and evolution in different domains. With a focus on returnees' self-assessments of their post-return situations and their evolution over time, we found that post-return situations are highly complex and dynamic. This complexity is, firstly, shown in its multidimensionality. Although the themes mentioned were comparable to previous studies on post-return situations (Black *et al*., 2004; Ruben *et al.*, 2009), we found a greater and explicit importance of the themes 'health' and 'perspective' and 'agency'. Interestingly, in contrast to previous research, respondents in our study did not mention the impact of the socio-cultural shame of a failed migration, the difficulties in meeting family or community expectations, or the social distance between returnees and stayers (Markowitz & Stefansson, 2004; Riiskjaer & Nielsson, 2008; Schuster & Majidi, 2013; Van Meeteren *et al*., 2014), which confirms the importance of a contextualized study of return migration (Huttunen, 2010; Van Meeteren *et al*., 2014). Though further research is needed to explore this difference in depth, one hypothesis here is that it could relate to the normality of migration in these countries (Ishkanian, 2002) or, following Massey and colleagues (1993, p. 452), its 'culture of migration', whereby "migration becomes deeply ingrained into the repertoire of people's behaviour," leading to a normalization of return migration. Another possible hypothesis, also indicated by the respondents, is the strength of childhood ties in both countries, on which migration or return seems to have little impact: "Nothing changed with my friends because we are friends from the beginning and nothing can change between us. For a 100 years you can live in Europe and after you come back, there will be nothing changed."

Secondly, next to the multi-dimensionality of post-return situations, Wright (2011) stresses the importance of looking at the interplay between different dimensions in examining migrants' wellbeing. This research confirmed this interplay, but the narratives of the returnees also stressed the possible *contrasts* between different themes, which helps an understanding of the *inherent ambiguity* of how returnees experience their post-return situation, an issue that has remained underexposed so far. According to Markowitz and Stefansson (2004),

the effort to deconstruct the notion of an 'easy and natural homecoming' has focused on rather one-sided, pessimistic pictures of return migration, instead of including a more complex and balanced account, containing elements of both hardship and satisfaction. Respondents in this study mentioned throughout all themes inhibiting and hampering issues, which strongly complicated the post-return situation, though at the same time also positive elements and resources in each theme, which mitigated the difficulties faced (Best, Cummins, & Lo, 2000; Young, 2001). Therefore, with Markowitz and Stefansson (2004) we could see return more as a 'future-oriented social project', wherein returnees try to (re)construct a new sense of place and future plans, instead of focusing on an 'impossible homecoming'.

Equally important, this study stressed the diversity in value and importance the returnees attached to the different themes. This relativity is widely recognized in the fields of, amongst others, wellbeing and quality of life (Cummins, 1996; Diener & Suh, 1997; Inoguchi & Shin, 2009), and includes several concepts, such as 'domain importance', 'value priority', and 'psychological centrality', to discuss this issue (Hsieh, 2003), although this seems to be fairly new in the domain of return migration. Recognizing the attribution of different meanings to similar situations, in which one theme can negatively or positively outweigh or compensate for other themes (Best *et al.*, 2000), might help in understanding the complexity and unpredictability of post-return evaluations. Not only, therefore, should the outcomes of return processes or their sustainability compared with a particular norm, be considered, but foremost the meanings returnees themselves attribute to their situation (Wright, 2011).

Yet, this is not a plea to consider everything as individual or relative. Deriving from insights from cross-disciplinary studies of wellbeing, we know that returnees' individual evaluations are also in themselves socially determined, anchored in collective understandings and social relationships, and strongly influenced by the opportunity structures of the society people live in (Abbott, Wallance, & Sapsford, 2011; Wright, 2011). As well, there are particular core domains that are important for everyone throughout the world (Abbott *et al.*, 2011; Cummins, 2005). Many similarities could therefore be found between returnees' post-return living situations and the lived realities of non-migrating Georgian and Armenian citizens (Abbott *et al.*, 2011), which raises questions about the intrinsic difference between returnees and stayers. However, our study has shown how the migration experience influenced the so-called 'perceptual dimension' of wellbeing (Wright, 2011), referring to values, perceptions, and experiences related to how people think and feel about what they can do and be. The migration experience created feelings of having gained something ("We had lost something and now we found it again and now we can appreciate it") or lost

something ("I miss Belgian comfort and style of everything") or changed the respondents' standards for comparing their living situation (Pedersen, 2003), subsequently changing the value they attached to several themes. This marks a clear difference between returnees' evaluation of their situation and that of stayers. More longitudinal follow-up is needed to further comprehend this temporal dimension of return processes, including also looking at whether there might be something like a 'returnee identity' (Cornish, Peltzer, & MacLachlan, 1999).

Besides its complexity, even within a relatively short period of time after the return, our study illustrated the dynamic character of post-return situations, in which having perspectives and a feeling of agency strongly influenced this dynamic: evolution in post-return situations often ran parallel with changes in returnees' abilities to take action and create change (Abbott *et al.*, 2011; Fozdar & Torezani, 2008). Following Cassarino (2014), this involves return policy needing to enhance migrants' access to opportunities, rather than pursuing a sustainable or durable return. Our data indicate, though, that the returnees do need support as well, as the received support was often a meaningful factor in creating opportunities.

Third, next to the complex and dynamic character of post-return situations, we found returnees' feelings of security and safety to be very important, as also stressed in wellbeing literature as an important prerequisite in people's subjective wellbeing (Cárdenas, Mejıá, & Di Maro, 2010; Cummins, 1996). However, returnees' perspectives showed that their concept of safety extends far beyond the conventional understanding of physical protection from harm, a conceptualization which is often the only prerequisite for return within the return policy of host countries (Zimmermann, 2012). Respondents talked, amongst other themes, about having a secure or stable income, rendering it possible for them and their family to survive, and also to create a future; about being protected against arbitrariness and corruption, and as such leading to peace of mind and an overall feeling of being protected by law; and about receiving the necessary health care, sometimes literally protecting them from death. Seen from the perspective of the returnees, their 'ontological security' (Giddens, 1991) entails physical, material, and juridical elements, as well as the need for stability and predictability of life, and the opportunity "to carve out a life plan and envisaging [sic] a trajectory into the future" (Chase, 2013, p. 860).

Finally, the longitudinal approach revealed the impact of life-cycle effects on returnees' evaluation of their situation and the dynamic of return processes. Important life events, such as getting married or the birth of a child, strongly influenced the evaluation of and changes in the post-return situation. Equally, returnees' accounts suggested that the migration experience has a smaller impact

on elderly people, since they notice fewer changes in the society they return to ("I don't see any changes, maybe only a new road that has been built"), and their time abroad had less impact on those landmarks in life than for some younger respondents ("Because I went abroad, I have no wife, no children"). Yet, at the same time, for elderly people with a limited social network the burden of 'restarting life again' could be very difficult.

In conclusion, the present study shows how the lived realities of returnees are complex and contextual, and even more nuanced or ambiguous than often presumed. Returnees' views need therefore to be heard, together with broad attention to the specific contexts in which post-return processes take place. This pleads for a large flexibility when supporting returnees, instead of the current 'one-size-fits-all approach' of AVRR support, whereby similar support is given to all returnees, regardless even of their country of origin (Cassarino, 2008; MGSoG, 2012; Whyte & Hirslund, 2013). Secondly, although the added value of reintegration support is sometimes questioned (Cassarino, 2014; Ruben *et al.*, 2009), and our findings have also confirmed the precariousness of the economic activities that returnees could start up with the (small) reintegration budgets, participants also indicated that the AVRR support contained elements that helped them in their return processes and enhanced their wellbeing. The dynamic interplay of different life domains also involves financial support also having a positive impact on people's self-esteem and emotional wellbeing (Wright, 2011), and giving some opportunities and perspectives for change, as an element of direction and security within the ambivalence of the return process.

Notes

1. From a policy perspective, a distinction is made between *forced* return, compulsory return enforced by physical transportation out of the host country, and *voluntary* return, referring to returning out of 'free' will or in compliance with an obligation to return to the country of origin, but without the use of force (EMN, 2011). Although the 'voluntariness' of the latter is surely contestable (Black & Gent, 2006; Ghosh, 2000), we chose to use this term to make a distinction from migrants removed forcibly (deportation).
2. We cooperated with the NGO Caritas International as a gateway to possible study participants. Together with the International Organization for Migration, they are the Belgian partners for the implementation of the governmental reintegration support programme.
3. Six respondents from the initial group were not interviewed after their return. Fourteen respondents were interviewed one year after return, but did not participate to the second interview. Drop-out reasons at the first and second

interview moment were: respondents resided permanently or temporarily abroad at the moment of the fieldwork (n=11), respondents ceased participation (n=4), it was practically not possible to arrange an interview during the time of the field visit (n=4), and the respondent could not be reached (n=1).

4. The code assigned to the interview quotes refers to the respondents' gender, their age at the time of the interview, and the number of the interview (first or second year after return).

5. All respondents returned with the support of the Belgian AVRR programme, which meant that all their travel expenses were paid, they received a cash amount of pocket money, and they were allocated a reintegration budget (minimum 500 euro – maximum 2700 euro for a person returning single). This reintegration budget could then be used, for example, to start an income-generating activity, to renovate or rent a house, or to pay medical expenses (Fedasil, 2015).

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6
The boundaries of transnationalism: The case of assisted voluntary return migrants*

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Abstract

Studies on transnationalism have seldom focused on migrants returning to their country of origin with few resources and limited mobility. This study sheds light on the transnational connections of migrants who returned with an assisted voluntary return and reintegration programme from Belgium to Georgia and Armenia. Using Boccagni's (2012) analytical framework, we revealed returnees' interpersonal, institutional and symbolic transnational ties, although these connections were often limited and weak, with a gap between their desire and ability to participate in the transnational field, and with a small impact onto their daily lives. Yet, these connections were largely valued, symbolically and emotionally. These findings question current conceptualizations of transnationalism, as also the sole focus on the home country as context where transnational ties should have impact on, and call for a broader attention to the subjective and symbolic dimensions in the return–transnationalism field.

6.1 Introduction

Since the 1990s, the 'transnational turn' in migration research, as one piece of the emerging field of transnational studies (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007), has supported recognition of the influence of the continuing ties that contemporary migrants and their descendants maintain across national borders (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). Instead of the previous 'national' approaches, which located migration research within the context of a specific nation state (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2003), transnational perspectives on migration stress the increasingly circular nature of migrants' lives, and their simultaneous commitment to multiple societies, potentially leading to the formation of transnational identities and to participation in transnational economic, familial, political, religious and sociocultural practices (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004; Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007; Marcu, 2014; Smith & Guarnizo, 1998). While the first generation of transnational migration studies focused on the transnational ties of immigrants in the context of western receiving societies, in the last decade the idea of transnationalism has also been connected to return migration (De Bree, Davids, & de Haas, 2010; Engbersen *et al.*, 2014). In this article, we argue that studies on return and transnationalism have mainly focused on returnees who are more clearly involved in the transnational field (Carling & Erdal, 2014; Conway, Potter, & St Bernard, 2012; Marcu, 2014), and have paid less attention to the transnational connections of migrants returning under more disadvantaged conditions. By drawing on the case of migrants who return within an assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programme – by definition returnees who have limited resources, nor large access to mobility, we illustrate how our understanding of the nexus between return and transnationalism benefits from also including those migrants whose access to the transnational field is restricted. The paper starts with a critical discussion of the literature on return migration and transnationalism, before turning to the empirical study where we explore the transnational dimensions in the lives of migrants who return with AVRR support (Boccagni, 2012).

6.1.1 Return migration and transnationalism

Early writings on immigrants' transnationalism have often been critiqued for overstating the phenomenon's occurrence, yet now it is well-recognized that not all immigrants participate in transnational practices, and studies document possible barriers (e.g., low socio-economic or weak legal position) that may reduce or inhibit immigrants' transnational lifestyle (Bloch, 2008; Guarnizo, Portes, & Haller, 2003; Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007; Portes, 2001; Van Meeteren, 2012). Though in the field of return migration, we notice that this link between

migrants' return and their transnational connections still seems to be much stronger (Carling & Erdal, 2014). One reason might be that these transnational linkages in return migrations are mainly studied in rather mobile groups of returnees who are more easily involved in the transnational social field (Carling & Erdal, 2014; Conway *et al.*, 2012; Marcu, 2014, Sinatti, 2015). However, for several groups of returnees, the mobility opportunities after return to the country of origin are restricted (De Giorgi, 2010; Kalm, 2012; Weiβ, 2005), which may impact on their transnationalism. Moreover, migration trajectories as a whole influence the types of transnational practice accessed, meaning that the post-return transnationalism of migrants probably varies widely (Carling & Erdal, 2014).

Yet, those migrants whose access to transnational practices is not self-evident, because they have little or no access to mobility, they possess few resources or their return could be considered as (partially) forced, have been largely left out of the debate. An important, but still limited, exception here are studies of the transnational ties and practices of deportees, migrants forced to return by deportation, but strongly constrained in realizing a transnational life after return (Drotbohm, 2011; Miller, 2012; Peutz, 2006). Golash-Boza (2014) reveals that deportees do maintain certain forms of transnationalism, in particular their use of transnational ties as a coping strategy to deal with the emotional and financial hardship caused by their deportation. At the same time, the reliance on these ties also serves as a reminder of the shame of their deportation, giving transnationalism an ambivalent meaning. Drotbohm (2011) argues that deportees maintain a strong desire to stay connected to the place they feel part of, despite the exclusion, echoing Pedersen's (2003) statement that returnees experience continuing ties with their life abroad.

This paper aims to integrate the experiences of asylum seekers, rejected asylum seekers and undocumented migrants who return through AVRR programmes into the study of transnationalism. This group is of interest and relevance for several reasons. First, owing to their specific migration trajectory, most migrants subscribing to AVRR programmes lack residence documents in the host country, which restricts backwards and forwards mobility between different countries (Whyte & Hirslund, 2013). Second, these migrants often return with few resources and little capital (Cassarino, 2004), a factor possibly inhibiting their access to transnationalism and transnational resources that could help to rebuild their lives after return (Pedersen, 2003). Third, their motives for returning are heterogeneous and may combine elements of both compulsion and choice, since most consider returning as their only left-over option (Koser & Kuschminder, 2015; Webber, 2011). Yet, at the same time they often do not consider their return as 'forced'. This diverse position in-between 'forced' and 'voluntary' return may also impact their transnationalism once returned (De Bree *et al.*, 2010; Sinatti,

2011). These three elements render these returnees' access to transnationalism less obvious than for other returning groups, which is possibly also a reason why the theme of transnationalism is under studied in this group (Snel, Engbersen, & Leerkes, 2006). Studying transnationalism in such a specific group with a particular migration trajectory will provide more analytical clarity in the content of transnationalism, and will add nuances to the discourse on transnationalism, as a precondition for fully grasping the theoretical potential of this perspective which can act as a lens for understanding migrants' everyday lives (Boccagni, 2012; Carling & Erdal, 2014).

6.2 Methods

This study investigates whether the everyday post-return lives of migrants returning with AVRR support contain transnational dimensions by examining their transnational ties with the host country from which they returned. Following Boccagni (2012), we focused on the perceived importance of those ties from the subjects' perspectives through interviews with 79 migrants who returned with AVRR support from Belgium to two countries of origin, Armenia and Georgia. When returning with AVRR support, returnees receive organizational (travel documents and flight ticket), financial (an amount in cash given at the airport and a reintegration budget given after return), and reintegration support (counselling in the host country to prepare the return; advice and support from a local non-governmental organization in the country of origin to enhance the reintegration process) (Fedasil, 2009). Admission to the programme requires that, if present, returnees give up their Belgian residence status or permit, and consent to refunding the costs of travel if they return to Belgium in the next five years.[1] Through studying returnees' transnational ties in one particular context (one host country: Belgium; two adjacent countries of origin: Armenia and Georgia), we attained a relatively homogeneous sample with regard to migration trajectory and to structural factors in the host and home countries that influenced post-return lives and transnational ties.

The respondents were selected through purposive sampling (Neuman, 2006): all Armenian and Georgian migrants who returned with AVRR support from the Belgian NGO Caritas International[2] within the research period (January 2010 – May 2012) were asked to participate in the study at a meeting prior to their return. Once returned, respondents were as far as possible interviewed twice, in the first and second years after the return respectively. These data were completed with detailed field notes of observations of the returnees and their families during several home visits, thereby creating an in-depth picture of the existence of participants' transnational ties, their importance for the migrants

themselves, and the role they played in returnees' everyday lives. After being informed about the study's content and objectives, 85 'returning units' (representing a single migrant, a couple or a family) agreed to participate before their departure, of whom we were able to interview 79 after their return. Fourteen returning units were interviewed once after return and 65 were interviewed twice, resulting in 144 interviews in total.[3] The respondent group consisted of asylum seekers (n=27), rejected asylum seekers (n=45) and undocumented migrants (n=7) (39 men returning single, 15 women returning single, 7 couples and 18 families with children). The average time they had lived in Belgium was 1 year and 7 months (SD: 19.7 months; range 1 - 132 months). At the end of their stay in Belgium, the living conditions of most respondents were characterized by a difficult housing and financial situation, though their return motives and general attitudes and feelings towards the return varied.

The interviews took place at a location chosen by the respondents (in a public place, at their homes or at the office of the local NGO supporting the returnee). Some interviews (n=9) were conducted without an interpreter (in Dutch, French or English), but in most interviews (n=135), respondents preferred the support of an interpreter (Armenian, Georgian or Russian). Before the start of each interview, the research aims and conditions of anonymity and confidentiality were clarified, and after receiving the interviewee's oral informed consent, the interview started. Using open-ended questions, participants were asked about their post-return lives, their ties with Belgium and the influence of these ties on their daily lives.

To investigate whether migrants' everyday post-return lives contained a transnational dimension and to operationalize what exactly comprised 'transnational ties', we used the analytical framework developed by Boccagni (2012) to analyse our data. In this framework, three analytical categories of ties are distinguished based on what lies at the other end of the tie. The first category involves migrants' interpersonal relationships with significant others abroad (further referred to as 'interpersonal ties'), which may result in the circulation of remittances, in cross-border communication practices and in transnational caregiving practices. A second category involves migrants' interactions with institutions related to the state, the market and civil society abroad (further referred to as 'institutional ties'). Migrants maintain institutional ties when the institution concerned has a persisting relevance for them as a perceived source of rights, opportunities or obligations. Third, migrants may have 'symbolic' and 'emotional ties' with past life experiences abroad, which may drive them to reproduce particular elements of their previous lives in, for example, certain consumption patterns, ways of dressing or use of symbols. In a first step of the analytical process, respondents' different descriptions of their contacts with

Belgium were coded and subdivided into Boccagni's three categories. In a second step, as presented in the following sections, the data in each category were further analysed to explore the content of the ties, their intensity and their specific meaning for the respondents and for their daily lives.

6.3 Interpersonal ties - Keeping in touch

> "I miss Belgium because I still have friends there. I still have contact with them through the internet, I have not stopped the ties with Belgium because it was part of my life. (female, 54 years)

The stories of the respondents revealed, first, that interpersonal ties with people abroad existed[4] and were highly valued by the respondents. At the same time, though, we observed that the contacts they had were limited and very rarely resulted in what Boccagni (2012) describes as possible consequences of transnational ties, namely the 'circulation of remittances' or 'engagements in transnational caregiving practices'. The people they had contact with were mostly other migrants of the same nationality or from other post-Soviet states, or (to a lesser extent) family members, usually because most respondents had little contact with Belgian people when residing in the host country due to the language barriers and their segregated living in asylum centres. Respondents who had Belgian friends mentioned that the suddenness of their departure from Belgium had prevented them from saying goodbye and exchanging contact information, making it now impossible to communicate with these friends. Several respondents also mentioned the importance of the Belgian social worker who had guided them during the asylum procedure, but also here, respondents saw no possibility of re-establishing contact. The remaining contacts with friends and family abroad happened through sporadic internet and telephone conversations, rendering it possible to maintain friendships and to exchange information about each other's wellbeing, although nothing more than this. These transnational ties also did not lead to any tangible support (such as money transfer) or to any influence on their behaviour in their daily lives (cf. social remittances). Only one respondent mentioned that regular contact with a Belgian friend was very supportive because it resulted in financial and moral support.

Second, clear gaps were noticed between respondents' desires and their ability to maintain interpersonal ties. Respondents' wishes to have more regular and more extensive transnational contacts were seriously constrained by financial and practical barriers, such as not being able to afford internet access. Access to communication tools thus cannot be taken for granted (Mahler, 2001) and people's differential potential to compress distances should be recognized

"contingent on the accessibility and usability of ICTs, as well as on the capability to complement this with physical mobility (hence, of course, on the selective relevance of migration controls)" (Boccagni, 2012, p. 7). Yet, complementing virtual contacts with physical mobility is important, since transnational communication is only a starting point for maintaining personal ties and social relations, and face-to-face contacts on a periodic basis are still crucial for reinforcing these ties (Baldassar, 2008; Urry, 2002). Almost all respondents expressed their desire to go and visit friends or family members in Belgium to strengthen or renew the ties, though here all felt inhibited by financial (travel costs) and legal barriers. Concerning the latter, several respondents indicated that the agreement they signed before entering the AVRR programme prevented them from returning to Belgium within the first five years after return, also stressing that they did not understand the real content of the agreement. Further, several returnees referred to the difficulties they faced in obtaining a visa to travel to Belgium. These legal and structural barriers led to a restricted mobility and thus an inability to bridge physical distances. It made one of the respondents reflect that he probably was deported (instead of returning voluntarily), although he really wanted to return and personally asked to sign up with the AVRR programme:

> "Was I deported? My wife and daughter wanted to go to visit Belgium as a tourist, to visit their grandmother and aunt who have papers in Belgium, but their request was rejected at the embassy. Why I don't know. Maybe it is because of me, because I have returned back. (male, 38 years)

The importance of the possibility of maintaining transnational interpersonal ties for returnees' wellbeing was illuminated by a mother who returned while her son and his pregnant wife stayed in Belgium; her feelings were echoed by other returnees who were separated from their (grand)children because of their return. She described the hardship of being separated from her family, since visiting her son was impossible as she was prohibited from re-entering Belgium, and calling him was too expensive. She had never seen her granddaughter and thus attached great value to the pictures her son was sending, as proven in the pride and care with which these photos were shown to the researcher, thereby illustrating their large emotional value. Following Baldassar (2008), these pictures can be seen as special 'transnational objects', important because of their tangibility, and serving as a kind of 'proxy form of co-presence' when the physical presence is absent, but overall embodying a deep longing for the absent person. Further, this illustrates that the 'split return' does not automatically lead to transnational ties (Carling & Erdal, 2014).

Some respondents could renew their ties when friends or relatives came to visit them in Armenia or Georgia:

> “ Some friends I have, they are already citizens in Spain. So they come for several days or several weeks here, and then, there is contact. When we are together at the table, sometimes we speak in Spanish and no one understands! (male, 32 years)

As illustrated in the quote, these visits, and the common language they spoke, reconnected them to friends and to their migration experiences, as proof of the past mobility (Drotbohm, 2011). Demonstrating linguistic competences here proved the added value of the migration experience (Yngvesson & Coutin, 2006), and also distinguished the respondent from non-migrants. Yet, this was only possible at such rare moments; in the respondent's daily post-return life, he could never use these language skills. In particular, this kind of face-to-face contact in Georgia and Armenia is only possible when the visitors have citizenship rights in Belgium or another EU country, which makes the returnees very dependent on those people, and also confronts them with largely asymmetric positions between themselves and their friends (Carling, 2008; Mahler, 2001; Urry, 2002).

6.4 Institutional ties – Inaccessible sources of rights and opportunities

> “ If you are born in a country and you have the right documents to reprove that, if you go and live there when you are 18 years, how can they ever refuse you? (male, 32 years)

Ties with transnational institutions were very rare. Respondents' only continuing interactions with Belgian institutions or the Belgian state were established through the AVRR programme. The programme's post-return reintegration support was implemented by a local partner organization of the Belgian NGO, resulting in a mostly indirect and also temporary tie with a Belgian institution. Yet, several respondents recognized, and highly valued, the 'Belgian style' in the way of working of the local organization, in particular the absence of the atmosphere of bureaucracy, distrust and corruption that often surrounds the social services in post-communist countries (Iarskaia-Smirnova & Romanov, 2002). This way of working was thus experienced as a continuation of the care experiences they encountered in the social welfare system in Belgium (Gualda & Escriva, 2014; Huttunen, 2010). Yet, these ties ended when the AVRR programme stopped, six months or one year after return.

In this domain, respondents desired more extensive ties, but also here, these were not considered accessible. Several respondents mentioned that they would like to return to Belgium to work for a certain period, but they did not see any legal opportunity to do so. Further, all respondents whose children were born in Belgium expressed the hope or the expectation that this place of birth would entitle their child to Belgian citizenship or at least to some privileges in their birth country (Belgium) when they turned 18. Some interviewees found it difficult to believe or accept that this was an unrealistic expectation.

6.5 Symbolic ties – Emotional connection and longing for a place

> “ Every day, I think of Belgium [deep sigh]. I will always remember the time I spent in Belgium, because life was good there, wasn't it? I also remember the language, trying not to forget it. I cannot forget it, because I enjoyed the time I stayed there. (male, 59 years)

Throughout our conversations about their post-return living situations, the respondents gave and displayed extensive evidence of their continuing attachment, both symbolic and emotional, to their past lives in Belgium, and to Belgium as a place and a society, thereby illustrating a sense of longing for the place they left behind and their efforts to create forms of reunion or co-presence (Baldassar, 2008). Their experience of this transnational symbolic and emotional connection was expressed in four different ways. First, the respondents often reminisced about their time in Belgium, the life they had there, the people they had met, the different habits and culture they encountered and the places they visited. Many were eager to illustrate their knowledge of Belgium to the interviewer. Second, ties with Belgium were symbolized in the careful preservation of small artefacts connecting them to these past lives. We observed how respondents held on to different items such as documents (temporary residence permit, social security card), children's drawings from the Belgian kindergarten, a notebook with common Dutch phrases, clothes and other souvenirs. Besides these objects' function as presence-by-proxy of people's connections with Belgium (Baldassar, 2008), equally with the pictures they received from family members (cf. supra), these objects also functioned as 'proof' of the respondents' former lives in Belgium in an attempt to materialize their past experiences and existence abroad (Conlon, 2011; Drotbohm, 2011; Ho & Hatfield, 2011; Yngvesson & Coutin, 2006). Third, as has been similarly described in the case of deportees (Drotbohm, 2011), respondents' desire to remain connected with Belgium was reflected in their efforts to stay informed about events occurring there, through watching the news, asking friends abroad about

novelties, or as shown in, for example, their cheering for Belgian contestants in international competitions, keeping a Dutch ringtone on the phone or trying to sustain acquired language skills. These language skills, which they were eager and proud to display to the (Belgian) researcher, seemed highly important for many respondents (see also for example Tannenbaum, 2007). Through speaking one of the Belgian languages, they felt reconnected to the place and the community where they had spent several months or even years. Language thus seemed to function as an important symbolic tie, as a proof of their migration experiences, and even as symbolic capital, and was probably prized because of the absence of other (tangible) capital resulting from the migration experience. The high value attached to their language skills could also be interpreted as respondents proving their legitimate membership of Belgian society, since in Belgium language is one of the major foci for realizing 'integration' into society. The emotional value language had for the returnees also became clear in the huge disappointment and sorrow we observed when they realized that their language skills were of no use after return and deteriorated quickly because of the limited opportunities to practice.

Fourth, we found symbolic ties with Belgium in respondents' identification with and orientation towards Belgian values, norms and society, and their attempt to hold on to certain habits and virtues they learned abroad. Many described how the migration experience had changed them as a person, for example through their enhanced insights into the host and home countries' societies and greater diversity in their overall life experience. More concretely, respondents' confrontation with a different culture, in particular with regard to qualities such as calmness, punctuality, respect for the law and respect in personal relations (e.g., politeness and civility towards others in daily encounters), had shown them how things could be done differently from what they were used to. This experience of life abroad had thus changed them personally (Carling, 2008) and could be considered an individual social remittance (Levitt & Lamba-Nieves, 2011). However, the great difficulties they experienced in maintaining these symbolic ties make it likely that they will disappear over time, in line with accounts of how migrants' transnational identification with the home country weakens the longer the migrant lives abroad (Snel *et al.*, 2006). But longer follow-up would be needed to confirm this.

Some returnees indicated that these transnational ties distinguished them from people without similar experiences. Yet, their impact did not seem to go beyond the individual returnee, which corresponds with Boccagni's (2012) remark that symbolic ties mainly affect (only) the lives of the migrants. None of the interviewees named any element that could be considered a 'tangible reproduction' of this orientation towards Belgium, such as sharing the ties with

other returnees (analogous to what Boccagni (2012) describes as the sharing and practising of immigrants' homeland attachments together with their co-nationals overseas), or projecting these changes in mentality onto people in their environment or in their interaction with them (Tannenbaum 2007). Yet, extended research on non-migrants in the immediate environment of the returnees would be needed to reach any firm conclusion on this point. The transnational ties did not, however, diminish the frequently expressed feelings of belonging to the country of origin. This shows that the existence of ties with the host country did not hamper feelings of belonging to the country of origin, just as immigrants' orientation towards the home country does not contradict their integration abroad (Levitt, De Wind, & Vertovec, 2003; Mazzucato, 2008; Snel *et al.*, 2006).

The disjuncture between respondents' desire to maintain ties with Belgium and their ability to do so was also illustrated in the way some interviewees approached and valued their contact with the researcher. Several respondents suggested that the researcher come and visit more often, since they appreciated 'a visitor from Belgium'. The physical presence of the researcher thus represented a certain 'contact with Belgium' or even an affirmation and demonstration of their ties with Belgium.

> My neighbours always ask me who was at my home, when you are coming. And then, I explain to them that you are from Belgium and you come especially to see me, and they say "oooh". (male, 54 years)

> [Pointing at the tablet of chocolate received as a small gift at the end of the interview] I will break it in very, very small pieces and give one to all Armenians! [laughs] I will explain to them, I received it from you. (female, 57 years)

The researcher was also asked to pass on greetings, hugs or personal messages to particular persons in Belgium, or greetings and words of thanks "to the Belgian people" in general. Following Baldassar (2008, p. 259), we here argue that "the researchers may also come to embody the internalized presence of transnational […]country by proxy": the researcher thus functioned as co-presence by proxy for 'Belgium', or for particular Belgian individuals, and the visits of the researcher represented a symbolic tie with the host country or an interpersonal tie with a Belgian person that otherwise could not be established or renewed. Yet here we equally need to acknowledge that the researcher's profile, as a Belgian citizen whom they had already met in Belgium before their departure, also may have influenced respondents' answers concerning their transnational ties. Since it is impossible to erase the potential influence of interviewers' profiles on the data

collection (Edwards, 1998), we have tried to make this impact 'visible' by encompassing a reflexive evaluation during the data analysis.

A final example of the gap between returnees' desire and their ability to maintain transnational ties, though also a clear indication of the importance of symbolic ties for the interviewees, is the extensive talking by almost all respondents about their wish to return to Belgium, mostly 'as a tourist' without the aim of resettling, but to see and directly experience the place again in an attempt to keep connected with it (Urry, 2002). One respondent wanted to open up new perspectives through such a visit: "I saw it (Belgium) out of poverty, I did not have the chance to see it. But now, I want to return and see it from another perspective, to see it as a tourist." Others wanted to bring their family to Belgium, to show them the country and what they had experienced there. Several returnees expressed the wish to return permanently, though almost all said that they would only do so when they were able to stay on a legal basis in Belgium, indicating thereby that they did not want to return to their previous situation as an asylum applicant: "To be sincere, I really want to go there! But I know that I will not get papers, so if I will not be legal, there is no way." Although remigration to Belgium did not occur,[5] and was unlikely to occur in future, the respondents strongly adhered to that idea of returning to Belgium if "things did not work out". This idea of remigrating to Belgium is a clear illustration of their 'longing for the place' (Baldassar, 2008) and functioned as a hypothetical back-up plan, as a moral resource for dealing with the difficulties and injustices they were confronted with in their country of origin. This symbolic connection with Belgium, this 'myth of remigration', strongly resembled what is described in the literature on immigrants in host countries as 'the orientation towards the home country' and 'the myth of return', the image of returning to the home country, some day, that immigrants hold onto as a strategy for coping with their living abroad, yet often without ever achieving a return (Anwar, 1979; Zetter, 1999).

6.6 The return–transnationalism nexus: The boundaries and importance of transnationalism

Boccagni's analytical framework, distinguishing migrants' transnational ties by the referent at the other end of the tie, is a valuable lens to study the transnational dimension in the lives of migrants returning with AVRR support. This framework offers ways to illuminate the (non-) existence of three separate categories of transnational ties, which all three represent diverse social phenomena and engagements and are otherwise conflated under the broad umbrella of 'transnationalism'. The results of our study, as framed within this theoretical

perspective, significantly deepen this return-transnationalism nexus in three different main aspects.

First, Boccagni developed his framework to document migrants' transnational ties in host countries, like most studies on transnationalism do (De Bree *et al.*, 2010). He argues that migrants' transnationalism can be theoretically elaborated by using conceptual tools from globalization theories, such as the notion of 'social action at a distance', whereby the actions of social agents in one location (i.e., migrants in host countries) can have significant intended or unintended consequences for the behaviour of 'distant others' (i.e., non-migrants in home countries). Our use of Boccagni's framework in the context of returnees demands the adaptation of the two reference points of the transnational ties: the migrant is in this case a 'returnee' physically located in the country of origin, and cross-border links are made with persons or institutions abroad or with the former host country. However, studies on transnationalism in the field of return migration have mainly focused on the impact of the 'distant others' (i.e., migrants or non-migrants in the host country) on the returnees' living contexts and on the people in their proximity (in the country of origin) (Conway & Potter, 2007; Conway *et al.*, 2012; Jones, 2011; Portes, Guarnizo, & Landolt, 1999). This shows that there is also an impact of transnational ties on individuals in one's proximity. This could call to differentiate the study of transnationalism in these divergent contexts of return migration and migration to a new (host) country, yet, we rather want to argue that studies on transnationalism need to hold a wider perspective, looking both at the impact of transnational ties on distant and on nearby environments. The partial focus on the impact of transnational ties in solely the returnees' environment also points to an almost discriminatory focus on the 'benefits' of transnationalism for countries of origin (Portes, 2001), which is echoed in celebratory discourses linking return migration to development and in current return migration policy discourses in Western European countries (Åkesson & Baaz, 2015; Van Houte & Davids, 2008). Yet, this one-sided perspective on transnational ties fails to do justice to the realities of transnationalism as a reciprocal relationship, and the transnational scope therefore needs to be broadened largely.

Second, our study showed that migrants returning within a voluntary return programme had limited and weak transnational ties, but at the same time valued these ties as highly important. These findings reveal the gap between the physical space these returnees inhabit and the social, emotional and affective spaces they strive to negotiate (Pries, 2007), and also point to the possible mismatch between returnees' desires and their abilities to participate in the transnational field. Overall, our respondents had very little ability to reach out to other places (Gielis, 2009), which strongly limits what Levitt and Rajaram (2013) described as the

porosity of return or the self-perpetuation of transnational ties after return. Respondents' access to transnational ties was, at first, mediated by their migration experience, mainly as asylum seekers. This status as asylum applicant evoked important structural barriers to establish contacts with Belgian nationals, institutions and habits: while still having an ongoing asylum procedure, they did not have the right to work and they mostly lived in segregated refugee centres. Participants' living situations in the host country were therefore by no means conducive to creating sustainable ties (Åkesson & Baaz, 2015). Yet, when migrants were able to establish interpersonal ties in the host country, their relatively quick and sometimes unprepared departure from the host country, their constrained financial resources after return, and the states' migration policies forbidding them to return to the host country for a period of five years, all inhibited their access to mobility and thus their ability to complement their virtual transnational contacts with physical contacts. These physical contacts could help returnees to strengthen their transnational ties, and could also lead to the circulation of remittances from friends and family in the host country to the returnee in the country of origin. Strong transnational ties and remittances can improve returnees' living conditions after return (Golash-Boza, 2014), as also the increased social capital that returnees have acquired abroad (Åkesson & Baaz, 2015). The transnational perspective in this study thus also illustrates how restrictive immigration policies create an 'immobility regime', in which barriers, restrictions and inequalities in realizing human mobility determine people's opportunities (Carling, 2008; Levitt *et al.*, 2003; Turner, 2007) and create boundaries to their transnationalism. As such, the return of particular groups of returnees leads to a 'forced settlement', in contrast to other circumstances and contexts where returnees can be 'forced into mobility' (Sinatti, 2011) or migrants can be 'pushed into transnational lifestyles' (Levitt & Jaworsky, 2007). This nuances the idea that the forms and frequencies of transnational ties people *wish* to maintain depend on their integration in the host country (De Bree *et al.*, 2010) as our results have highlighted that migrants' ability to maintain ties can be mediated (including by factors such as integration), despite the fact that they do have the wish to sustain ties. Access to the transnational social field is thus highly selective, situational and stratified (Boccagni, 2012; Smith, 2005) and, in the case of these returnees, strongly determined by their migration trajectory. We therefore argue that transnationalism is not automatically created in the field of return migration, and return migration is also not a sufficient condition to create transnationalism.

Finally, Boccagni considers migrants' transnational ties as relationships and practices through which they "exert a significant, provable and reciprocal influence on non-migrants in the countries of origin" (Boccagni, 2012, p. 4). Yet, our study of the transnational dimension in the lives of AVRR returnees questions whether returnees' ability to exert provable influence on others (Boccagni, 2012)

should be a precondition for qualifying a tie as 'transnational'. The study showed that, although respondents' ties did not lead to the development of transnational practices or the circulation of remittances, their existing interpersonal and symbolic ties with the host country had a highly important symbolic and emotional value: first, these ties meet the respondents' strong needs and desires to retain their connection with the place and community they once felt part of, and from which they are now separated because of their return (Butcher, 2010; Coutin, 2000; Drotbohm, 2011; Pedersen, 2003; Weiß, 2005). Second, their experiences of transnational belonging are important since they may function as meaningful symbolic capital, as a proof of their migration experience and ties with Belgium. Following Åkesson and Baaz' (2015) interpretation of Bourdieu's theory on forms of capital to analyse returnees' abilities for reintegration in their country of origin, we argue that transnational ties could be considered as a form of capital in itself. This is probably most clearly illustrated by their attachment to the 'myth of remigration', which can be considered a personal and moral resource to cope with the difficulties they are confronted with in their post-return lives, an idea that is sometimes adhered to for years after return, even when there is no opportunity to maintain transnational ties (De Bree *et al.*, 2010). Third, as also illustrated in other studies, the contacts our respondents have with people in the host country contribute to their sense of happiness after return, enhance their feelings of belonging to the country of origin (de Bree *et al.*, 2010; Van Meeteren *et al.*, 2014), and confirm the importance of these ties throughout the return experience (Pedersen, 2003). These symbolic transnational ties demand another level of analysis, because of the different, less tangible form of cross-border connectedness (Boccagni, 2012), and because, as shown by the results, they produce less tangible social consequences. Yet, the ties have a large emotional impact on returnees, showing that the subjective and symbolic dimensions of transnationalism matter and should not be overlooked, "even if they fall outside the purview of traditional research methods" (Levitt *et al.*, 2003, p. 571) and, we would add, even if they do not have tangible influence.

To conclude, the transnational perspective is a valuable lens for studying the post-return lives of returnees who return through voluntary return programmes, and helps to illustrate the extent of diversity within migrants' transnationalism (Carling & Erdal, 2014). Yet, the importance of transnational symbolic ties in the return experiences and returnees' daily lives, the consequences of the gaps between returnees' desires and their ability to access the transnational social field, and the necessity to consider different contexts when studying the impact of transnationalism all call for a broader and multi-layered view on transnationalism. Further, these findings also need further investigation, in particular in the context of different forms of return migration.

Notes

1. People returning through the Belgian AVRR programme do not receive a legal prohibition to re-entry the European Union (as is the case for people who are deported), though they must sign an agreement that they will pay back the travel costs if they return to Belgium within the first five years. This agreement is difficult to enforce in practice, and is mainly controlled when migrants apply for AVRR support for a second time within a period of five years. Their application then will be rejected, and they will be asked to pay back the travel costs, though the latter also cannot be legally enforced (Fedasil, 2009).
2. The NGO Caritas International and IOM are the partners of the Belgian government for the implementation of the reintegration support programme.
3. The drop-out reasons were: respondents resided permanently or temporarily abroad at the time of the fieldwork (11), respondents ceased participation (4), it was practically impossible to arrange an interview during the time of the field visit (4), and the respondent could not be reached (1).
4. Most of the respondents had ties with people in Belgium, though some had stayed in several other countries before their return, and also mentioned ties with people in these other European countries.
5. One respondent out of the 79 returnees in this study did return to Belgium and applied for asylum again, after the problems from which he fled the first time restarted.

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7
Time heals? A multi-sited, longitudinal case study on the lived experiences of returnees in Armenia*

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Abstract

This article explores the dynamics of returnees' experiences and wellbeing from a longitudinal perspective. Analyses of interviews with four migrants returning with governmental support from Belgium to Armenia during the initial two years after their return illustrated the changing meaning they attach to places, return and migration. Their evaluation of the return experiences mainly depended on their post-return situation and wellbeing, contesting the idea that a higher willingness to return automatically eases a return. Further, the mutual, though diverse, influence between return migration and wellbeing confirmed the need for a holistic approach and to include temporal dimensions to understand the multiplicity of returnees' experiences and wellbeing.

7.1 Introduction

In recent decades, return migration has received increased attention in migration policy and research (Black & Gent, 2006; Cassarino, 2004; Matrix Insight, 2012). Despite previous approaches to return migration as an 'easy', 'natural' or 'unproblematic' homecoming, it is now well-recognized that return migration is a multi-phased, multi-layered, long-lasting and complex process and experience, which is sometimes even experienced as more difficult than the initial migration (Black *et al.*, 2004; Ghanem, 2003; Markowitz & Stefansson, 2004).

Migrants' post-return experiences seem being influenced by different elements. At first, Cassarino (2004, 2008) has largely elaborated on how differences in post-return experiences can be explained by migrants' 'return preparedness'. The author defines this concept of 'return preparedness' as, firstly, the free choice of migrants to return (willingness to return), and, secondly, the readiness to return, particularly the abilities and possibilities to collect those resources that are needed to return. Both elements are, according to Cassarino, strongly influenced by circumstances in both host and home country.

With respect to the first element, the 'willingness' of migrants to return, it is widely recognized that the voluntary or forced nature of migration (in general, not only related to return migration) may influence migrants' psychosocial wellbeing (Bhugra, 2004). With regards to return migration in particular, different authors have stressed the importance and centrality of migrants' motives to return, and their agency in the decision-making process whether to return or not – thus their 'voluntariness' to return, since this may influence returnees' possibilities and their rate of success after return (Cassarino, 2004), their possibilities to embed in the society of the country of origin (Ruben, Van Houte, & Davids, 2009), the perception of their return process (Cassarino, 2008), and their possibilities to create feelings of belonging post-return (De Bree, Davids, & De Haas, 2010). Yet, researchers have also indicated that there is no strict distinction between forced and voluntary migration; the decision to migrate, or to return, is often 'mixed', and a response to a complex set of factors of both compulsion and choice (Turton, 2003; Van Hear, Brubaker, & Bessa, 2009). Therefore, it is a false assumption that voluntary migration would be a 'safe' form of migration in terms of its consequences for migrants' psychosocial wellbeing (Vathi & Duci, 2016).

The second element in Cassarino's model, migrants' 'readiness to return', is said to be dependent on migrants' possibilities to collect, or their possession of, capital and resources to support this return process. This factors has received support in different studies as being influential in returnees' evaluation of the return

experiences and migrants' living conditions after return (Bhugra, 2004; Van Meeteren *et al*., 2014).

Next to this focus on returnees' pre-return situation as elaborated by Cassarino, other scholars have pointed at the impact of the entire migration experience on how returnees' experience their return, since migrants' evaluation of this return experience may depend on their initial migration motives (Constant & Massey, 2002), or, as Van Houte and Davids (2008) indicate, understanding migrants' post-return experiences demands a holistic approach whereby the experiences and living conditions during previous migration phases are considered. Similarly, Gualda and Escriva (2014) stress that previous experiences affect returnees' post-return possiblities, resources, and perceptions and evaluations of their living situation.

Thirdly, returnees' experiences of their return are also influenced by how they manage to reintegrate or readjust in different life domains (Ruben *et al*., 2009). Yet, this reintegration process is strongly influenced by the specific context in the country of origin, and migrants' personal capital and access to resources (Pedersen, 2003; Van Meeteren *et al.*, 2014). Various interrelated and dynamic impacting factors may be identified here, whereby individual returnees evaluate these factors differently (Gualda & Escriva, 2014; Pedersen, 2003). First, the ability to establish a secure material base for living is considered a central element in the return experience (Pedersen, 2003). Second, migrants' social networks, and their reintegration herein may be important resources to receive emotional support and support to solve problems in the return process, and for an overall greater wellbeing (Ruben *et al*., 2009). However, the supportive effect of social networks seems to be higher for migrants from privileged socio-economic backgrounds (Pedersen, 2003), and the inability to meet familial expectations related to the migration process may also hinder a positive return experience (Van Meeteren *et al*., 2014). Finally, returnees' sense of belonging to or, in contrast, their sense of disconnection towards the country of origin may affect their return experience and wellbeing (Pedersen, 2003; Vathi & Duci, 2016).

While there seems to be quite an extensive knowledge on possible factors impacting returnees' post-return living, most studies use a cross-sectional approach, studying this group at a particular moment in their return process and there is a paucity of longitudinal studies on returnees' living situations. Further, next to the paucity of studies incorporating the dynamic character of return migration, there are little studies that try to capture the complexity of these migration processes (Wright, 2011), since most focus on only one or a couple of impact factors. Thirdly, most studies look at returnees' living situations in terms of their economic situation, while less attention is paid to returnees' subjective

experiences about their return situation and about their entire migration process (King *et al*., 2014; Wright, 2011).

Looking at the return process as a 'situated concept', that is framed in particular events and experiences, and that reflects a particular social, personal and country-specific context, whereby its meaning is framed in the returning individuals' experiences and points of view (Long & Oxfeld, 2004), we use this contextualized approach to examine returning migrants' lived experiences and wellbeing from a longitudinal perspective. Through an in-depth longitudinal follow-up of the return migration trajectories of four returnees, we aim at capturing the complex interplay between different material, perceptual and relational dimensions of return processes, and at getting insight into returnees' lived realities and their subjective experiences of wellbeing throughout the return process (Van Houte & Davids, 2008; Wright, 2011). Hereby, we put particular emphasis on including a diversity of grades of 'voluntariness' in people's return-decisions in our study, given the emphasis this has gained throughout previous studies.

7.2 Methods

7.2.1 Study participants

In order to explore how migrants experience their return trajectories and how their wellbeing is shaped throughout the return migration process, this study examined the first two years in the return process of four migrants who were returning from Belgium to Armenia.[1] The respondents were selected out of a larger study, in which we conducted a longitudinal follow-up of 65 migrants who were returning to Georgia and Armenia with support from the Belgian assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programme as provided by the NGO Caritas International. For this study, we chose to select a homogeneous group in terms of country their of origin (i.e., migrants returning to Armenia), in order to reduce the heterogeneity in terms of the returning country context (Black *et al*., 2004; Cassarino, 2004).

Table 7.1: Summarized overview of respondents' stories

GRIGOR
Grigor migrated alone to Belgium in order to work and applied for asylum. His wife and children stayed in Armenia. After 19 months in Belgium, he applied for AVRR and wanted to start an internet café with the support that was allocated to him. At that time, his asylum application was rejected, he was living with friends and earned some money by doing small jobs for friends. After return, Grigor rejoined his wife and children and lived in the house of his parents in law in the capital. In the first year after his return, he used his AVRR budget to join the internet café of his friend. In the second year after return, he had divorced his wife and lived in a rented house. He started his own internet café.
DAVIT
Davit moved to Belgium with his wife and two children, after a rejection of his asylum application in Austria. They asked asylum in Belgium upon arrival, though left the asylum centre to live with a friend, as the living conditions in the centre were too difficult for the family. After 15 months in Belgium, they applied for AVRR and wanted to buy cattle with the support that was allocated to them. At that time, their asylum claim was rejected, they could no longer stay with their friend and the family had no income. The family returned to their private house in a village. In the first year after his return, Davit used his AVRR budget to start cattle breeding. He tried to regain his previous professional position as sports trainer and was training different children, but was not able yet to join the national federation. In the second year after return, the family lived at the same place. Davit's cattle breeding activity failed and he had no income from his training activities.
NAREK
Narek migrated with his wife and daughter to Belgium to find better living conditions and applied for asylum. At the moment their asylum application was rejected and they had to leave the reception structure, after 19 months in Belgium, the family applied for AVRR. Narek wanted to buy a car with the support that was allocated to them. The family returned to a smaller city near to the capital and could inhabit a floor of the house of Narek's father, though the place needed renovation. In the first year after his return, Narek started to work in distribution with the car he purchased with the AVRR budget. In the second year after return, the renovation at their living place had progressed and Narek continued his work in distribution, added with the manufacturing of figures and vases.
LILIT
Lilit migrated to Belgium for medical treatment, her husband followed five years later. After their reunion, they both applied for asylum. Two years after this asylum application, they received a negative answer on their request. For a short period, they were given shelter by acquaintances though were asked to leave the house. At that time, after Lilit and

her husband had been respectively seven and two years in Belgium, they applied for AVRR though did not know how to use the budget that was allocated to them.

Since the couple had sold their house in order to migrate, after return they moved in with Lilit's mother who lived in a village. In the first year after their return, the couple was not working and was still searching for a good way to use the AVRR budget. In the second year after return, the couple moved to a rented apartment in the capital in order to find work. The AVRR budget was used for cattle breeding in the village. Lilit had a temporary job.

Armenia is characterized by high emigration rates (Gevorkyan, Marshuryan, & Gevorkyan, 2006), due to, amongst other reasons, natural disasters, armed conflicts and the socio-political crisis after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Currently, the country is still recovering from the hard years following its independence, and is confronted with a poor socio-economic situation, high poverty levels, unaffordable or unavailable healthcare, and unstable political conditions, which all still form important causes of emigration, mainly to Russia, but also to Western Europe and elsewhere (Bakhshinyan, 2014; Falkingham, 2005). For most migrants, migration to Russia is mainly temporary, while migration to Europe is intended to be permanent. Upon migration to Europe, Armenian emigrants often take their family with them and the majority asks for asylum, though asylum recognition rates are very low, and most are thus not allowed to stay permanently (Bakhshinyan, 2014).

Concretely, we purposefully selected four cases which provided a rich account of the return experience, and who largely differed in their 'willingness to return'. This latter element was identified through looking at returnees' motives to return and whether they perceived their return mainly as compulsion or as choice. Although we acknowledge that the return of migrants returning with AVRR-support (Webber, 2011) is seldom truly voluntary, we found important differences in how people themselves labelled their decision to return as a 'voluntary' or a 'forced' decision. The study sample consisted of one single returnee, one couple, and two families (two parents with minor children). All of our respondents applied for asylum, but received a negative decision. Given that our research focused on their lived experiences related to their return process, we did not ask for more information about the background of their asylum application. Yet, we talked about their motives to migrate: two respondents migrated to work and to improve their living conditions, one interviewee to get medical treatment that was not available in Armenia, and one respondent left Armenia out of fear for his personal and his family's safety due to a conflict with a powerful individual (see table 7.1). Pseudonyms are used throughout the study to preserve the anonymity of the participants.

7.2.2 Data collection and analysis

In this study, we interviewed the participants three times: before they returned, so while still being in Belgium, but when they already had decided to return; one time during the first year after their return to Armenia; and once during the second year after return. The interviews before return took place in a separate room in the office of Caritas International, after the migrant had signed in for the programme, so at the moment the migrant officially confirmed his/her decision to return within the voluntary return programme. Research aims and conditions of anonymity, confidentiality and informed consent were clarified at the beginning of each interview. After the interview, the respondents were asked to reconfirm their willingness to continue the participation and be interviewed again within the first and second year after return. The interviews after return were held at a location chosen by the respondents (one time, the interview took place at the office of the local NGO supporting the returnee, two times at the returnee's business place and five times at the returnee's home). Three interviews were conducted without an interpreter (in French), the nine other interviews with the support of an Armenian (n=5) or Russian (n=4) interpreter. Although also two families with children were part of our sample, we only interviewed adults; in the case of a couple/family, both adults were interviewed together, though each time one person predominantly answered the questions. In the case of the families, this was the father; in the case of the couple, it was the woman. Considerable differences in perspective between the partners, will be mentioned explicitly. In these semi-structured interviews, we used open-ended questions to question returnees about their lived experiences regarding their living conditions, wellbeing, migration trajectories, and return processes.

All interviews were recorded, literally transcribed, and analysed with the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method, a qualitative research approach for exploratory and detailed examinations of how people make sense of life experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The IPA method emphasises the detailed analysis of particular cases, with each case as an entity on its own; IPA therefore is conducted with small, but purposively homogeneous samples, so that convergence and divergence can be examined in detail. Following Smith and colleagues (2009) recommendations at first we executed a case-by-case analysis. We started with an interpretative reading of the transcribed interviews of the first case, followed by an initial coding process, whereby all text fragments that seemed important with regards to our central research question were marked, and the researchers' initial responses to the text were annotated in the text. In a subsequent reading, the researcher noted to which general theme the text fragment related, which resulted in a thematic grouping of the fragments. Next, we looked for evolutions within the themes and interactions between the different

themes. This process was repeated for each respondent, and memos about evolutions and interactions were kept during the case-by-case analysis, to facilitate further analysis. As the final step, we looked for patterns of evolutions and interactions across cases, on which will elaborate in the discussion section.

Our findings need to be interpreted in light of some study limitations. First, given its focus on an in-depth exploration of a situated return experience, the country-specific approach and the small research group (n=4), the study sample limits the generalizability of our findings (Van Meeteren *et al*., 2014). Second, the selection of other case studies, even returning with the same support programme to the same country of origin, could have revealed additional or different results. Third, although the involvement of an interpreter was sometimes essential to overcome language barriers between the researcher and the respondent, the interpreter–respondent interaction could have impacted respondents' answers (Edwards, 1998), and the translations limit the possibilities to make linguistic comments and interpretations during the IPA analysis (Smith *et al*., 2009).

In the next section, we first present respondents' return motives and their plans upon return, which provide insights into their perspectives, attitudes and feelings about the return, and into their general wellbeing before their departure to the country of origin. Second, we present data from the interviews after migrants' return to Armenia for each respondent separately, as a case study in its own right, in order to do justice to the dynamism of the return experience and the rich data obtained for each participant (Smith *et al*., 2009). In a third phase, we look at patterns of evolutions and interactions across cases, completed with literature.

7.3 Initiating the return process

At the time of the first interview, which took place in Belgium, the respondents had already made the decision to return to Armenia within the framework of the AVRR programme. During these interviews, it became clear that all respondents were confronted with a gradual deterioration of their overall quality of living in the course of their stay in Belgium, in particular a deteriorating housing and financial situation. They were living with acquaintances or had to leave the asylum centre, and were not working nor did receive any financial support (anymore). Though, because of our sampling procedure there was large variety return motives and general attitudes and feelings towards this return, in relation to a large diversity in the degree of willingness to return.

While Grigor (male, 42 years) found his living situation in Belgium manageable, because he occasionally earned money and could stay with friends, he chose to return because his personal problems in Armenia were solved and he really

missed his wife and children. In this respect, Grigor's case differed from the other three cases, since they all migrated together with their nuclear family. Additionally, due to his previous working experiences in Armenia, Grigor had a clear view on how he wanted to use the reintegration budget he was allocated and this motivated him, made him enthusiastic about the return, and gave him a clear perspective for his future life once he would be returned.

> "I have experience because I also had an internet café in Armenia before I came to Belgium. I want to open a new one. I am a specialist. I know it will work, it is a good business. […] It is important, I have to start business, because I have two children, you know.

Davit's (male, 28 years) motivation to return was a combination of many factors and thus rather mixed. The living circumstances in the host country forced him to return: he and his family could no longer stay with his Belgian friend who already cared for them for several months, he could not find a job, and his family had no money anymore. Yet, he really wanted to return too, since an Armenian friend told him that it was safe to return, and his wife and children felt very unhappy in Belgium, because they missed their family and had experienced the life in the asylum centre as very stressful and threatening. His wife's symptoms of depression, caused by their living situation in Belgium were a clear push factor to return, though the return decision was framed as a positive choice, because Davit believed that returning would be better for the wellbeing of his family. As Grigor, he had a clear view on his plans after return (cattle breeding), and really hoped he could reclaim his place as a professional sports trainer. During this interview, he stressed that he wanted his return to be a voluntary return.

Narek and Lilit seemed only urged to return because of their living conditions in Belgium: Narek (male, 27 years) and his family applied for asylum several times, and when their lawyer informed them that they ran out of all possible options and had to leave the asylum centre, they decided to return. Once the decision was made, Narek was convinced that buying a car with the reintegration budget was the best option, and would provide the family with an income. The only thing he strongly kept doubting on was whether the promised reintegration assistance would indeed be given to him.

Also for Lilit (female, 33 years) and her husband, the financial support they received stopped when their asylum application was rejected. They could no longer pay their rent, and hereto moved to the house of acquaintances. However, when these acquaintances asked them to leave the house, they saw no other option than to return. They were deeply anxious about the return. They had no idea where to live since they sold their house before migrating, or how to use their

reintegration budget to gain an income. These elements created nervousness and fear for an insecure future they would face after return. These participants thus experienced the return process, and particularly the period between the application and the announcement of the return date, as highly stressful which further impacted their wellbeing. This was also the case for Davit: his difficulties with the Armenian embassy to obtain all necessary documents prolonged the waiting time before he could return, which made him feel powerless and depressed. Both Lilit and Davit expressed feelings of large relieve at the moment they eventually could departure.

7.4 Longitudinal perspectives on respondents' lived experiences of return

Before the actual return, the respondents were confronted with quite similar living contexts in Belgium, with overall little to very little readiness to return, but still quite divergent outlooks towards their upcoming return. The interviews after their return to the country of origin revealed that respondents' perspectives on the return process differed from their initial views before their return, and continued to change over time. In what follows, we present these changes in respondents' lived experiences for the four different case studies.

7.4.1 Declining wellbeing – Changing evaluations

Grigor, who was eager to return and had a clear view on what to expect and what to do after his return to Armenia, expressed in the second interview, seven months after his return, that he felt very happy. He had bought six computers and joined the internet café of a friend; he was pleased with the way the business was going, and felt very proud to announce that he had found an own location for his business where he would start in a month. He felt that the return process went smoothly, and he expressed strong feelings of belonging and satisfaction with Armenian cultural habits, such as family, food, and festivities.

> "Everything was normal, I adapted immediately, I was born here you know. I love my country, because this is my country.

Grigor expressed that he was "very, very pleased" with the decision to return, and he even regretted his initial migration to Belgium, mainly because of the main motive to return he earlier expressed, the longing for his family:

> “ I strongly regret that I went there, I would not do it again, I lost two years because of that. It was my big mistake to go there without me family, I should have taken them with me.

> “ I am happy here, I can live well and I am with my wife and children, so everything is good, everything is normal.

He did not miss Belgium at all, though he was reminiscent of the time he stayed in Sweden, where he lived with his family for seven years, hereby pointing at elements in the Swedish society that he felt were better than in Belgium.

However, in the third interview, one year and five months after he had returned from Belgium to Armenia, this wellbeing drastically changed: Grigor now regretted his return, and thought about moving to Sweden. This change was mainly due to drastic changes in his personal situation: he split up with his wife and they now lived separately; although he still enjoyed doing his business, he expressed frustrations towards the situation in Armenia with rising prices, hard work for an insufficient income, and little perspectives to improve his living:

> “ I have no house. Even if I work 100 years, I will not be able to buy myself a house here. If I work the same in Europe, I think I can manage.

His previous migration experience influenced him now in a different manner:

> “ [My stay in other countries] has affected me, and I don’t want to stay here. I wish to go.

Although he also stated he would always miss his country, the lack of perspectives and probably also the loss of belonging to a family, made him wanting to re-migrate to Sweden where he intended to re-apply for asylum. Despite his claim being already rejected twice (in Sweden and in Belgium), he believed that “maybe this time, it will be different”, as he knew stories from people in a similar situation who did get residence documents.

7.4.2 Return as relief and struggle – Ambivalence in the return experience

Davit’s return motives before the actual return were rather mixed, and also his view on his post-return wellbeing was quite nuanced. Eight months after his return, he had built a shed and had bought cows, which he considered as a profitable income-generating activity in his particular village, though he was confronted with rising forage prices, rendering it unsure whether his investment would give his family any profit. Further, he experienced difficulties to re-enter his

professional sports career, because of clientelism and because he did not have the 'right' political connections.

Yet, despite the rather difficult adaptation process during the first weeks after having been abroad for five years, and the harsh financial situation, Davit was quite positive regarding his situation. His wife and children were pleased that they were back in their home country, and they felt much more free now, compared to living in the asylum centre or when depending on friends. This feeling of freedom strongly enhanced their wellbeing.

> My son asked me: "Mum, we do not go to Belgium anymore, do we? Because there, we always have to sit inside the house and we cannot play". (Davit's wife)

Despite being happy to be back in his homeland, Davit saw little future for him and his family, due to the country's difficult socio-economic situation, the lack of jobs and the corruption and clientelism, which made it hard to reach a normal living standard or any possibility to 'build up' something in life. Also his perspective on the migration experience was rather dispersed: on the one hand, he regretted the migration because he considered it a failure, and because he got confronted now with the difficulty of restarting life and regaining a place in his profession. At the same time, he mentioned he did not regret the migration, "because I have made good friends, I did sports and was appreciated". Following quote points at these contradicting lived experiences regarding his stay abroad:

> I lived in extremes there. I saw very good things, but also experienced very bad things, periods when we were really hungry. So my opinion about my stay is very dispersed. Fortunately, I found people there who really helped me.

He still expressed frustration towards 'the Belgian system' that denied him a residence permit despite him following all rules. Yet, these personal experiences that evoked a negative perception of his living situation in Belgium before departure were now, after his return, distinct from the overall image he held from Belgium, which he now described as a good and fair country, where he would have liked to stay. Still, the overall evaluation of his migration experience led to the conclusion he would never want to live there again.

During the third interview, a year and a half after his return, his financial situation and general wellbeing declined, because, despite his continuous efforts, the cattle breeding failed and he still had not regained his professional status.

> Look… It is just difficult to live here, I don't even mean to live 'normal', I mean, it is difficult to live 'a little bit normal'. There is corruption everywhere.

But although his situation evolved negatively, his perspective towards his migration and return experience had not changed:

> I see everybody leaving from Armenia (...)
>
> Interviewer: You would like to go to another country as well?
>
> Davit: Me? No, no! For me, it is finished leaving, 'fini partir'! I left, then I came back here, and then after two or three months leave again? No, no, I'll stay here. Where would I go? Papers [residence permit] are a big problem for me, I would not be able to work.

He still felt being influenced by the migration experience, as it changed certain attitudes (being more punctual), yet this only evoked frustration and irritation in the daily confrontation with the 'non-European' Armenian approach of daily life, and particularly the way services and (equal) treatment were (not) provided to people.

7.4.3 An unexpected appreciation of life in the home country

Narek and his family returned when all possible options to prolong their stay in Belgium were exhausted. Yet, once the decision to return was made, Narek had a clear view on what to do after return. Immediately after return, he bought a car and restarted his work in the distribution of goods to shops. At the same time, he renovated one floor of his father's house in which they lived, yet he kept on dreaming of buying land and building his own house in the future. Although Narek expressed little willingness to return, he described their return as 'coming home'. After his return, he felt that during his stay abroad, he missed things that had happened in his family, and thus felt happy being back. Moreover, as also Davit did, Narek expressed how he regained the possibility to live a social and active life, and he liked the comfortable feeling of being in his own country: "The return was the right solution for us, if you stay in your own country, it is worth millions", in contrast with "feeling stressed as foreigner abroad". This image of his return and his home country largely differed from how he described both elements in the interview before his departure. On top, positive feelings had an explicit positive impact on his wife's mental health as well:

> It was awfully difficult in Belgium. My wife lost two babies there. This was because of the stress, and she has nothing to do there all the time, she could not do anything. Now she is back, and we are not going to the doctor, she has not these problems anymore.

The difficult migration experience and positive return experience influenced Narek's image on migration: he regretted his migration, the loss of time with his family, and the loss of money that he could have used much better in Armenia. He therefore stated he would never go abroad again:

> Sincerely not. Even if I would know there was a job in Russia or in some European country and I would be paid 5,000 euro, I would not go. God knows. It is right that you are in your country with your family and you have to work as hard as you can and not run after the money.

One year later, Narek made steps in extending his activities, improved his income and renovated his living place. Realizing this (although little) progress resulted in increased feelings of wellbeing, and an unchanged evaluation of his return and migration experience.

> It changes slowly, but it does improve. I just have to be patient and work.

7.4.4 Improving wellbeing – Changing evaluations

Finally, also for Lilit and her husband, the return decision was made because of external push factors, and before their departure, they had no idea how to manage life once returned. During the second interview, Lilit was really nervous and depressed, and strongly expressed a deep desperation with their living situation. The couple had solved their housing problem through moving in with Lilit's mother (who did not migrate and still lived in her house in a village), but the quality of the house was very bad (no sanitation or kitchen). Further, Lilit explained how she was confronted with inaccessible and unaffordable health care, while both her husband and mother were sick, and the impossibility to find a job. She described their return as 'their only choice' at that moment, though now largely regretted this decision:

> In Belgium, we were advised to go to other countries, but we could not, we had no money, the only option for us was to return. But now we have returned, and we are very, very disappointed, because there is no law, and our state, our government, is just making a massacre, a genocide. It is a nowadays genocide. Now I have returned, and I face a lot of problems here, to whom can I address myself? I will ask the president, what can you do for me? How can I take care of my sick mother, sick husband? Ok, let's say that Belgium has provided 500 euro for medical support, it is finished. What will I do afterwards? Whose toilet to clean in order to earn a little money? I have an education but how can I earn money in order to take care of them and to come out of the situation?

Her image of Belgium remained very positive, whereby she mainly stressed the huge difference between the two countries in how both doctors and officials treat you.

During the third interview, the couple's wellbeing increased remarkably. Seeing no perspective in the village where they were living, they moved to Armenia's capital, and although they were still confronted with a difficult financial situation, at the moment of the interview, Lilit was working. Although the job was temporary, being able to work strongly improved her wellbeing, made her feeling proud, and gave her feelings of agency to change her situation. With regards to the decision to return, the opinions of the couple differed: Lilit's husband said he would like to migrate again, since it was so difficult in Armenia to find work, and given that he had lived half of his life abroad, he felt not familiar with the Armenian context. He considered it as his wife's decision to return to Armenia. Lilit, on the contrary, still considered their return as the only possible option at that moment:

> When people are surprised that we returned after eight years, I explain it was impossible to stay there, because it was not legal, that's all. They often ask: Couldn't you go living in another European country? But no, never. I am tired of it, you have to change your whole life, and then restart in another country.

Alike Grigor and Davit, they still felt the huge impact of their migration experience in their current lives, yet, in contrast, they described it as something positive:

> From our nature, we are very honest people, so while living in Belgium, no matter how bad it was or how difficult the living conditions were, we always followed the rules. It was like this in Belgium, and now we are continuing in the same way here in Armenia.

Again, the difference between Armenia and Belgium was stressed, though they also noticed a certain adjustment to the Armenian context:

> Here in Armenia, there is a lot of 'mal-education'. Bus and taxi drivers for example use very bad language. In the beginning, I was really stressed by that, but now I am used to it again [laughs].

7.5 Cross-cutting themes in changing perspectives

Across the different cases, the evolutions and changes found in the post-return situations of the respondents stressed the dynamic character of return migration and reintegration processes, confirming that return is not only a stage within a possible ongoing migration cycle, but an ongoing process in itself. The return process and respondents' post-return situations clearly influenced their evaluation of their overall wellbeing. Throughout these four stories, both declines and improvements in returnees' wellbeing could be found at different times, as well as rather ambivalent evaluations of their wellbeing, since the return to the country of origin often entailed elements of both hardship and satisfaction. Clearly, also migrants' perspectives on their return experiences and return decisions evolved over time, which was illustrated by the stories of Narek, Lilit and Grigor. In each of these cases, the changes in perspectives on the return experiences were strongly linked to changes in their post-return situations and overall wellbeing, whether it was an improvement of their psychosocial wellbeing (Narek: between the situation before return and one year after return; Lilit: between the first and the second year after return) or a decline (Grigor: between the first and the second year after return). This joins Pedersens' (2003) statement that the everyday life-situations and the meanings that returnees themselves attribute to their situation strongly affect how migrants experience their return, illustrating that as past experiences are always remembered and interpreted in light of the present (Eastmond, 2007).

In accordance with these changes in perspectives on the return experience, the respondents' stories also exposed the importance of the broader migration experience within the return process (Van Houte & Davids, 2008; Gualda & Escriva, 2014), and how their perspectives on, and the impact of these migration experiences differ for each individual (Ackermann, 2003), even within the same

family (cf. Lilit and her husband). The experiences of Narek and Davit convinced both that they would never migrate again, evoking the feeling that their return was the 'right' decision for them; yet, Narek even regretted the migration, while Davit did not, and Davit's story illustrated how a migration process can be experienced as very ambiguous (Cornish, Peltzer, & MacLachlan, 1999; Ghanem, 2003; King & Christou, 2010). Their migration experiences also influenced their perception of the home country: for Narek, his experiences in Belgium led to a higher appreciation of his life in Armenia; for Davit, it created a more nuanced view on life in Europe, as being positive, though unreachable without a residence permit. In contrast, Grigor's story showed how his previous migration experience in Sweden, in combination with a declining current wellbeing, made him longing to migrate again. Though, during the first interview after return, his view on his migration experience was countered by a strong feeling of belonging to his country of origin. These evolutions illustrate how the meaning of places can change over time (Levitt & Rajaram, 2013), and under influence of migration experiences and changes in post-return living situations. The stories also illustrated that locality matters, given the fact that the place where people return to influences their possibilities (cf. Davit) or how the change in place of living, from the village to the city, open new perspectives (cf. Lilit).

Further, the stories of Lilit and Davit showed how they recalled a positive image about the host country, despite their personal difficulties and harsh experiences in Belgium (Kubal, 2015). This shows that perspectives on the migration experience can become detached from personal experiences, and can lead to an 'idealization' of the migration experience and how well everything functioned abroad (Pedersen, 2003), quite similar as researchers describe an idealization of the home country of migrants abroad (Cornish *et al.*, 1999; Markowitz & Stefansson, 2004; Warner, 1994). Moreover, these respondents described how their attitudes changed under the influence of their migration experiences, and their view on 'how things are done in Belgium' became a 'moral touchstone', a 'frame of reference', contrasting with the difficulties and injustices they were confronted with in their country of origin (Levitt & Rajaram, 2013; Pedersen, 2003). Lilit described this as something positive, making her a better person, though for Davit, it led to frustration when confronted with the disjuncture between both places and the clash between his changed mentality and the post-return reality (Pedersen, 2003).

Finally, the stories were less consistent about the continuing influences of the migration experiences. While on the one hand the experience seemed to have a continued importance and understanding of the life in the home country (Pedersen, 2003; Storti, 2011), Lilit on the other hand pointed at its decreasing influence and the fact that she gradually 'became Armenian again'.

7.6 Conclusion

This study explored the dynamics of migrants' return experiences in a multi-sited, longitudinal multiple case study on returnees' lived experiences of their return from Belgium to Armenia in the framework of a governmental assisted voluntary return and reintegration programme. We hereby captured the meaning these returnees attach to their return experiences and the dynamic interplay between the different dimensions in the return trajectories, in particular in relation to their pre-departure living situation and views.

Based on the detailed reading of these multiple cases, four concluding points can be made. First, the findings confirmed the value of Cassarino's (2004) theory of return preparedness, in particular the importance of migrants' willingness and readiness to return. It appeared that when returnees had a clear view on their post-return living situation while still being in the host country, the return process went easier. It provided returnees with a sort of 'orientation' immediately after return, which positively influenced their wellbeing in the first year after the return. These ideas about the possible direction in live after being returned depended on the specific work experience of the returnee or his/her locality of return (e.g., cattle breeding as sole possibility to make investments in a village).

However, throughout these returnees' stories, also some nuances about the influence of returnees' willingness can be made. When time passed, the opportunities or obstacles created by the specific living context in the country of origin became more prevailing. The respondents' stories indicated that their evaluation of the return experience depended more on their post-return situation and wellbeing than on the initial degree of willingness to return, a hypothesis that, given the specific and limited group of returnees and the relatively small variation in their initial willingness to return, needs further exploration. The respondents' willingness to return did influence their perception of the return process, though this changed over time and in relation to the fluctuations in their post-return situations. This observation adds to the argument that more willingness to return will not automatically simplify the return and reintegration process, urging to avoid the false dichotomy between forced and voluntary return (Turton, 2003; Van Hear *et al*., 2009; Vathi & Duci, 2016). Above, the renegotiation of return experiences in light of post-return living situations and previous migration experiences shows how migrants' view on their return experiences can be seen as performative acts (Butler, 1993; King & Christou, 2010), through which decisions, belonging and meaning of places and experiences can be renegotiated and relocated into personal biographies (King & Christou 2010), in order to rationalize and cope with apparent contradictions and make sense of the return experience (Cornish *et al*., 1999; Eastmond, 2007).

Secondly, and related to the first element, our findings stress how the different factors described in literature as impacting returnees' post-return living situations and their wellbeing post-return are indeed important, but strongly interact and influence each other. This supports the need for a holistic approach when analysing how returnees experience their return (Ghanem, 2003; Gualda & Escriva, 2014; Van Houte & Davids, 2008).

Third, the study illustrates how return migration can influence returned migrants' wellbeing, though in a very diversified way, as the stories showed how return improves as well as deteriorates returnees' wellbeing. Above, migrants' wellbeing also played a role in people's decisions to return, as explicitly shown in Davit's story, and, as illustrated in all the four stories, the respondents' post-return wellbeing impacted their views on their return and the entire migration experience. Yet, this association between wellbeing and return migration is often also mediated by other factors, such as the returnee's evaluation of his return experience or returnees' resilience, individual values and priorities.

Finally, the multiple changes in the lived experiences of the returnees suggest the necessity of incorporating a temporal dimension in the study of return experiences (Levitt & Rajaram, 2013). Further, these four case studies were not exceptional cases in the wider study sample of 65 returnees, and their stories relate to the stories and perspectives of many others. Yet the multiple factors that influence return experiences, and their strong interaction, highlight the necessity to be cautious with generalizations about returnees (Ackermann, 2003; Gualda & Escriva, 2014). Therefore, returnees' complex subjectivities entail a valuable analytic power (Lawson, 2000), and qualitative and longitudinal approaches are necessary to enable the understanding of the multiplicity of return experiences and returnees' wellbeing.

These conclusions, based on returnees' lived experiences, entail important implications for the AVRR programmes supporting the return process of these migrants. First, the results indicate the importance of support during the return process, both before leaving the host country, as after being back in the country of origin. The guidance given before the return may help returnees to reflect upon their readiness and willingness to return, and might give them a clearer orientation about what to do immediately after return. Both elements may help to bridge the – sometimes difficult – first period immediately after the return and may also positively influence their wellbeing once returned. Though, the dynamic character of return migration, reintegration processes and returnees' post-return situations indicates that support for returnees need to be available over a longer period of time, if needed and asked for by the returnee and/or his family.

Second, AVRR programmes are generally designed with as overall aim to facilitate 'sustainable return', mostly defined as the definite stay of returnees in their home country and thus the absence of remigration (Cassarino, 2008; Matrix Insight, 2012). Yet, the large influence of the living contexts in the country of origin after return, and the fact that AVRR programmes only focus on short-term support for individual returnees, without targeting the broader contexts in which they are implemented (Schuster & Majidi, 2005), render this focus on the 'sustainability' of return an unrealistic goal. We therefore need to rethink these AVRR programmes' goals, hereby arguing for more flexible and less stringent programmes that can be more aligned to returnees' specific needs and desires and to the particular contexts in which they are implemented.

Notes

1. The data collection for this case study and for the larger longitudinal follow-up study was conducted by the first author.

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8
Returnees' perspectives on assisted voluntary return and reintegration support*

*Based on Lietaert, I., Broekaert, E., & Derluyn, I. (in preparation). Returnees' perspectives on assisted voluntary return and reintegration support.

Abstract

Although assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) are widely implemented in all Western European countries, and the merit of reintegration support is explicitly laid in the idea that this support encourages return and contributes to sustainable returns, the impact and the content of these programmes remain vague. Therefore, by drawing analyses of reintegration assistance reports and interviews with migrants returning with the Belgian AVRR programme to Armenia and Georgia, this article uncovers how reintegration support is implemented in reality. We illustrate how different types of support that are planned before departure, eventually translate into concrete reintegration support after return. Furthermore, our explicit focus on returnees' perspectives on this support reveals several contradictions or alignments between the AVRR programmes' features and returnees' broader needs, with their (lack of) possibilities and with their views on what they consider as supportive in their return and reintegration processes. Finally, these results show that the programme's focus on economic reintegration aligned with the returnees' perspectives yet, its disregard of the structural conditions in returnees' country of origin leads to failure to reach its objectives, and to an individualization of the problems returnees' are confronted with. Furthermore, the findings stress the need to incorporate a relatively broad flexibility in the adaptation of reintegration support, in order to find connection to returnees' life-world and meaning-making processes.

8.1 Introduction

The return of migrants from the European host country back to their country of origin has become a high priority in European migration policies, and different measures have been developed to encourage or enforce this return (Black & Gent, 2006; Cassarino, 2008; Koch, 2014; Matrix Insight, 2012). Today, return migration policy distinguishes between *forced return* or deportation (compulsory return enforced by physical transportation out of the host country) and *voluntary return*, the latter referring to return out of 'free' will or the unforced compliance with an obligation to return to the country of origin (EMN, 2011). In current policy discourses, it is argued that an efficient return migration policy consists of measures of both voluntary ánd forced return, yet with a preference for voluntary return (Cherti & Szilard, 2013; Schneider & Kreienbrink, 2010), as a more humane, cost-effective and sustainable return measure (IOM, 2004; Thiel & Gillan, 2010). Over the last three decades, the emphasis on *sustainable voluntary return* has led to a proliferation of governmental assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programmes. Such programmes provide administrative, logistic and financial support to migrants, in order to ensure that the rights and dignity of the returning migrants are respected, to facilitate migrants' return and their economic and social reintegration in their country of origin, and to discourage returnees' re-migration out of the host country (Black, Collyer, & Sommerville, 2011; IOM, 2014; Koch, 2014; Koser & Kuschminder, 2015; Schneider & Kreienbrink, 2010).

Yet, although AVRR policies are widely developed in all Western European countries (IOM, 2014; Matrix Insight, 2012), different scholars have questioned the policy discourse and the evidence base of these programmes, arguing that these mainly are built on a top-down framework of understanding return and reintegration, hereby excluding returnees' experiences, realities and needs (Åkesson & Baaz, 2015; Cassarino, 2008; Hammond, 1999).

First, although AVRR programmes operate without physical enforcement and clearly differ from forced return measures, it is argued that calling these programmes 'voluntary' return programmes is misleading (Black *et al*., 2011). These programmes often target migrants who have no legal permission to stay, which means that migrants often comply with this 'voluntary' return because they lack any hope to still obtain a residence permit and/or they want to avoid staying as an undocumented migrant in the host country and the related risk of forced repatriation (Black *et al*., 2004; Strand *et al*., 2008; Van Houte, 2014). Therefore, this policy-based label of 'voluntary return' is often contradicting returnees'

experiences about their return (Blitz, Sales, & Marzano, 2005; Cassarino, 2004; Turton, 2003; Van Houte, 2014).

Second, the merit of reintegration support is explicitly based upon the idea that this support encourages migrants to return and that the support also will contribute to sustainable returns (Matrix Insight, 2012; Koser & Kuschminder, 2015). However, there is no evidence whether and how AVRR programmes enable return and do indeed promote 'sustainable' return and reintegration (Koser & Kuschminder, 2015). Governments have commissioned remarkably little monitoring of these programmes, which is one of the reasons why little is known about the post-return experiences and reintegration processes of these returnees (Black *et al*., 2011; Cherti & Szilard, 2013; ETF, 2013; HIT Foundation, 2010; Koser & Kuschminder, 2015; Webber, 2011). Moreover, the scarce available researches on the reintegration processes of migrants who have returned with AVRR support question the added value of the reintegration support (Van Houte, 2014).

There is not only little evidence base for the impact of reintegration support, also its content remains vague. Overviews can be found about all different possible types of reintegration support (Matrix Insight, 2012), yet, there is little knowledge on what exactly happens after return and how the reintegration support is implemented in practice. Further, there is very little insight into returnees' perspectives on this support, on their views on how the support impacts their reintegration processes and wellbeing, and whether they evaluate the support as useful or helpful in their return processes. This lack of knowledge increases the likelihood that the developed support measures will discord with returnees' needs and wants (Cassarino, 2008; Zimmermann, 2012). Therefore, through drawing on analyses of 'assistance reports' in which social workers document the planned reintegration support (before return) and the actual provided support (after return), and on analyses of returnees' narratives about the reintegration support that is provided to migrants who are returning with the Belgian AVRR programme, this article aims to enlarge our insights on how AVRR support is implemented in reality, and examines how the provided reintegration support is interpreted and evaluated by the programme beneficiaries.

8.2 Methods

8.2.1 Study setting: The Belgian AVRR programme

We focused on the Belgian AVRR programme as implemented by the NGO Caritas International Belgium[1] (hereafter referred to as Caritas Belgium) in the countries of origin Armenia and Georgia. Through studying the content of the reintegration support in one particular AVRR programme, we aimed to minimize the differences

in the way the reintegration support was operationalized (Matrix Insight, 2012), in order to attain an in-depth understanding of how the support measures are constructed and evaluated by the returnees. The two neighbouring countries of return Armenia and Georgia were chosen because a relatively high number of migrants residing in Belgium decide to return on a voluntarily basis to these two countries (IOM, 2010), and the socio-economic situation in both countries is quite similar (ETF, 2013).

8.2.1.1 Target group, types of support and implementation of support

The Belgian AVRR programme is funded and coordinated by the Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil). The programme receives funding from the European Return Fund to facilitate the additional reintegration support for returnees who want to start a microbusiness in their home country[2] (Fedasil, 2011).

The *target group* of the programme[3] are asylum seekers who abandoned their claim, rejected asylum seekers and undocumented migrants who had not applied for asylum (Fedasil, 2009).

The support consists of three increasing layers of support: the first level of support, *travel support*, aims at enabling returnees' physical return, and includes pre-departure counselling, travel costs (flight ticket, luggage), assistance during flight transit, and an optional small cash sum (max. 250 euro for an adult, 125 euro for a child, paid in cash at the airport) to compensate for the cost of travel from the airport to the final destination (Matrix Insight, 2012). The arrangement of the flight tickets is executed by IOM Brussels (Fedasil, 2011; IOM, 2015).

A second level of support, *reintegration support*, can be allocated to returnees when they need further support after return. This reintegration support aims at facilitating small-scale, individual projects which help returnees to restart their lives and to reintegrate in the country of origin (Fedasil, 2009). For the implementation of this reintegration support, the Belgian government contracts two 'reintegration partners' in Belgium; one of these is Caritas Belgium. This reintegration partner decides whether a returnee is granted this reintegration support and collaborates with partner organizations in the home countries to implement the support after return (EMN, 2010; Fedasil, 2009).

Reintegration support comprises 'in-kind' support, which means that the returnee is allocated a 'reintegration budget', but does not receive this amount in cash. The reintegration budget consists of 700 euro per person (maximum 1,750 euro per family). For vulnerable groups (i.e., pregnant women, unaccompanied minors, victims of human trafficking, elderly people, persons with a handicap or a severe illness), another 700 euro can be added (Fedasil, 2009, 2010). The Belgian

government has stipulated that the reintegration budget can only be used to pay for training and schooling; external support (e.g., support to find a job, legal or psychological support); costs related to returnees' installation (e.g., temporary housing or basic house equipment and furniture); medical support; income-generating activities; and support before departure (e.g., translation costs of documents relevant for the reintegration process or additional luggage assistance). The type of support the reintegration budget will be allocated to is to a certain extent flexible (within the programme limitations as set by the Belgian government), in order to tailor the support to the returnees' individual needs and requests. Before their return to the country of origin, the returnee receives information about the scope and conditions of the support by a reintegration counsellor of Caritas Belgium, and a reintegration plan is prepared and sent to the local partner organization to check its feasibility. Reintegration plans set the modalities for spending the reintegration support money, yet some flexibility is allowed: the types of support that are financed by the reintegration budget can change after return, though again within the framework of eligible types of support as set within the programme. The purchases and payments of goods and services that facilitate the returnees' socio-economic reintegration need to be done by, or in consultation with, the counsellor in the country of origin. After return, the partner organization in the country of origin gives the returnee administrative and financial support, and guidance on how to use the allocated reintegration budget (Fedasil, 2009, 2011). For this guidance and for the implementations of the support in Armenia and Georgia, Caritas Belgium works with social workers. The reintegration support lasts from six months up to one year after return. The social worker monitors the returnee's situation through home visits and meetings. Once the support is finished, the social worker reports to the Belgian reintegration partner about the guidance and financial support, including all receipts for the purchases, as part of Caritas' obligations to the Belgian government and the European Commission (Caritas International, 2015; Fedasil, 2010).

Finally, a third level of support, *enhanced reintegration support*, increases the individual reintegration support with 1500 euro for returning migrants who want to start a microbusiness[3] (Fedasil, 2010). This enhanced reintegration can only be used for purchases related to the income-generating activity. The guidance follows the same principles as for the standard reintegration support, yet returnees are required to write down their idea for their income-generating activity in a 'business plan', in order to stimulate returnees to look for realistic ideas and to check the feasibility of returnees' plans before departure. Yet, also here, returnees can change their business plan to a certain extent, when they get confronted with unforeseen changed circumstances after return.

8.2.2 Data collection and analyses

Data were collected through follow-up interviews with migrants who returned with AVRR support from Belgium to the republics of Armenia and Georgia, from the moment they made the decision to return, until two years after return. These data were complemented with the information out of the reports written about the support provided, both the reports written by the Belgian reintegration counsellor (before departure) as those made by the social worker in the country of origin (after the support is finished).

Respondents were selected through purposive sampling: all Armenian and Georgian migrants who returned with AVRR support from Caritas Belgium within the research period (January 2010 – May 2012) were asked to participate in the study at a meeting prior to their return. Once returned, respondents were interviewed twice, respectively in the first and second year after the return. Based on ethical considerations, we did not request participation of returnees suffering from a life-threatening disease (n=3) (i.e., cancer) or who had been diagnosed with severe psychological problems (n=4). This has probably led to an underrepresentation of people with several health problems (and thus those who mainly received medical support after their return) in this study.

After being informed about the study's content and objectives, 85 'returning units' (representing a single migrant, a couple or a family) agreed to participate before their departure; out of this group, we were able to interview 79 units after their return The interviews with these 79 returning units were used in this study. Almost all units (n=65) were interviewed three times (14 were interviewed only two times): before their return, so while still being in Belgium but when they already had decided to return; one time during the first year after their return; and once during the second year after return, resulting in 223 interviews in total.[4] The respondent group consisted of asylum seekers (n=27), rejected asylum seekers (n=45) and undocumented migrants (n=7) (39 men returning single, 15 women returning single, 7 couples and 18 families with children). The average time they had lived in Belgium was 1 year and 7 months (SD: 19.7 months; range 1 - 132 months). At the end of their stay in Belgium, the living conditions of most respondents were characterized by a difficult housing and financial situation, though their return motives and general attitudes and feelings towards the return varied.

The interviews before return took place in a separate room in the office of Caritas Belgium after the migrant had signed up for the programme, so at the moment (s)he officially confirmed his/her decision to return within the voluntary return programme. The interviews after return took place at a location chosen by the respondents (in a public place, at their homes or at the office of the local NGO

supporting the returnee). Some interviews (n=26) were conducted without an interpreter (in Dutch, French or English), but in most interviews (n=197), respondents preferred the support of an interpreter (Armenian, Georgian or Russian). Before the start of each interview, the research aims and conditions of anonymity and confidentiality were clarified, and after receiving the interviewee's oral informed consent, the interview started. Using open-ended questions, participants were asked about their perspectives on the support they would receive (before return), were receiving (within the first year after return) or had received (within the second year after return).

In order to explore the ways the reintegration support was implemented and evaluated, a content analysis of the assistance reports (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was combined with a thematic analysis (Howitt & Cramer, 2007) of the literally transcribed interviews with returnees. In a first step, the assistance reports were analysed to determine which types of support were planned for each respondent before the departure, and which types of support were implemented after return. In a second step, the interviews were coded using the code-and-retrieve software programme NVivo 10 (NVivo, 2012) to analyse returnees' evaluations of the different types of support they received. In a final step, as presented in the following sections, we first combined the information retrieved from the assistance reports with respondents' narratives. Next, based on further analyses of respondents' evaluations of the support, possible contradictions or alignments between the AVRR programmes' features and the returnees' perspectives were discerned.

8.3 Findings

8.3.1 The support as planned before the return to the country of origin

Table 8.1 shows the different types of reintegration support that were planned for the respondents before their departure from Belgium to their country of origin.

Table 8.1: Overview planned support before departure and given support after return[i]

Type of support	Number of times planned before departure[ii]	Number of times implemented after return[iii]
Support to start an income-generating activity	75	74
Support for medical care	33	28
Support for housing	17	18
Purchase of house equipment	16	7
Purchases for children	8	4
Support in job search	6	-
Payment for education and training	4	2

[i] The total number of 'planned support before departure' and 'implemented support after return' outweighs the number of returning units involved in this study, since returnees planned and received multiple types of support; [ii] 29 respondents planned 1 type of support, 29 planned 2 types, 14 planned 3 types, 5 planned 4 types and 2 respondents planned 5 types of support before departure; [iii] 41 respondents received 1 type of support, 27 received 2 types, 8 received 3 types, 1 received 4 types and 2 respondents received 5 types of support after return.

This overview gives insight into what is determined as returnees' needs before their return. Almost all respondents planned to use a part of their reintegration support to set up some kind of income-generating activity. The interviews at that moment, while still being in Belgium, revealed that the degree to which these ideas about the income-generating activity were already worked out varied strongly. Some had clear and concrete plans how to invest the money, often based on previous work experiences or available resources, or, in contrast, their lack of resources or work experience urged them to plan a particular income-generating activity, as they saw no other possibilities. Others, although feeling the pressure to find a way to earn an income after return, only had vague intentions or plans, and the reintegration counsellor had to take the lead in examining their possibilities for income-generating activities.

Only for four respondents, it was not intended to use any part of the reintegration budget for an income-generating activity. Because of administrative reasons, one returnee only received the additional support for vulnerable groups, which he could only use for medical support. One young returnee wanted to use the budget to finish his education. Two older women only planned to use their budget for material and medical support. One of them explained:

> “ I cannot do some kind of business. I am too old, my health is bad. I do not have confidence in doing business. You need to know the right persons for that, you need to pay them [informally], you cannot start a business just like that. But can't they use this money to maintain me? A little bit of money each month, so I can live? (Armenian woman, 62 years)

Several respondents planned to use a part of their reintegration budget for medical support. Although several respondents were diagnosed with mental health problems in Belgium, most only opted for medical care.

A large group, in particular those returnees who did not own a house in their country of origin, asked to use the financial support to pay their rent and buy basic house equipment. In contrast, there were little explicit demands for support in finding a job, or for using the budget for training or education or things solely related to the children, except those respondents who returned with very small children often asked for support to buy equipment or food for their baby.

Although this provides some insights into what the respondents' considered as important support after return, these types form already a translation of returnees' requests into the pre-defined, eligible types of support.

The strong focus on income-generating activities, considered as an important measure to facilitate returnees' socio-economic reintegration, tuned up with the respondents' principal concern on how to gain an income after their return and how to succeed in maintaining one's family. However, during the interviews, the respondents also revealed other needs that could not be covered by the reintegration budget. First, several respondents asked for support (food, accommodation) to bridge the period between their registration for the AVRR programme and their actual departure, since they were living on the streets without shelter or food. Second, several respondents explicitly asked to use the budget to pay for extra luggage on the flight, expressing often the large difficulties they felt to leave so many of their belongings behind. Yet, because the reintegration budget could not cover the huge costs for extra luggage on the flight, the respondents were encouraged to stick to the prescribed maximum weight. During an interview after return, a respondent described the difficult process of leaving behind most of the possessions they had:

> […] when I was completely ready to return, [the social worker] told me how much luggage we could bring with us. We had to weight everything and see what we could bring. All the other things that we had there, we had gathered a lot of things, the things we could not take with us, I distributed it to the others […] I had a chess board, I had several things that I could not bring with me. I had a very good chess and I liked it very much and I still regret that I could not take it with me. (Armenian couple)

Other requests for support, such as the payment of debts in the country of origin or having temporary housing immediately after arrival[5], were mentioned here, but were not considered in the allocation of the reintegration budget, because they were ineligible or difficult to realize. Furthermore, it is very likely that not all possible worries or request were mentioned, as many respondents were already well informed about what kind of support could be provided by the reintegration programme.

8.3.2 The implementation of the reintegration support after return

Table 8.1 also mentions the types of support the reintegration budget was used for after return, as based on the reports of the social workers in the country of origin. This overview shows that the focus on income-generating activities remained after return, yet some changes can be noticed between the planned types of support before departure and the actual use of the reintegration budget after return. The interviews revealed that several respondents who initially, before return, had planned to use a part of their budget for medical support, house equipment or child-related purchases now had used everything for their income-generating activity. The frequency of times the budget was used for housing, stayed rather stable, although there were quite a lot of respondents who changed the plan for this kind of support: several respondents who wanted to rent a place before their departure, eventually stayed with relatives and used this part of their budget for their income-generating activity. Others who owned a house and did not foresee to use their reintegration budget for housing, still used a part of their budget to rent, since they did not consider it as safe enough to return to their own house. What is more, the content of 'housing support' was often changed. While before return the category support for housing was meant to be used for rent, the interviews illustrated that after return, in deliberation between returnee, social worker and Belgian reintegration counsellor, it sometimes seemed more appropriate to use the 'housing support' the make essential renovations to peoples' houses, or, to pay part of people's utility costs (e.g., gas, electricity, water), as this was a heavy burden for returnees who did not gained an income (yet).

Table 8.2 presents an overview of the different types of income-generating activities, ranging from shops in which several persons were employed, to small-scale agricultural activities that only supplied food for own consumption:

> “I want to buy a cow, because we are two old women here and we can use milk. When we have milk, I can make cheese, it is very important for us to eat that. Only one cow will make a big difference […]. I don’t think, from one cow, it will be possible to sell any milk. But for me, it is very important. Because, I can buy bread from my pension, but then, I can make cheese, so it is more suitable. The chickens will give me eggs. I have 18 chickens and it is possible I have 10 eggs per day. If you are in a village, if you have eggs, milk, and cheese, it is very good. (Georgian woman, 67 years).

Table 8.2: Type of income-generating activity[i]

Type of activity	Frequency
Agriculture	**23**
Animals (pigs, cows and chickens)	17
Greenhouse	3
Fruit/vegetables	3
Services	**22**
Taxi	6
Internet club	3
Car repair	3
Hairdresser	3
Transport of goods	3
Other (snack bar, renovation works, sports training, bar)	4
Trade/shop	**23**
Clothes	7
Grocery shop	5
Transporting and selling	2
Other (bakery, flowers, car spare parts, second hand cars, curtains, shoes)	9
Handicraft (carpenter, shoe maker, seamstress, musician, jeweller)	**5**

[i]N = 73, two respondents invested their budget in the same shop.

Several respondents changed their idea about their incoming-generating activity after return. Reasons for such changes were the fact that the general or personal conditions after return were different than expected; returnees felt pressured to earn an income as soon as possible; or the planned business was not feasible with the available budget. Others carried out their plans as set before returning, yet needed to transform their business after some time:

> I had to sell the milk cows I had bought, I bought another type of cattle, because we couldn't sell our milk to the factory anymore. (Armenian man, 31 years)

> I decided to reinvest the money because I am ill and it is more easy to keep the bees than to work with the cows. I kept one animal who gives milk, but with the new animals, it is easier for me, less problems like with the cows to find grass and running after them everywhere. (Georgian man, 54 years)

Although several respondents reported they were supported in finding the most appropriate form of income-generating activity in the form of self-employment, none of the respondents received support to find a job as employee. The high unemployment rates in both countries (ETF, 2013) and the important influence of clientelism in the job market (Karklins, 2002) most likely made it impossible for the social workers to successfully provide this type of support.

Finally, after the programme had ended, several respondents questioned in the third interview whether any kind of additional reintegration support was possible. This concerned requests for additional medical support by respondents suffering from chronic diseases, and requests for additional funding to enlarge the established income-generating activity. The latter request was mainly expressed by respondents who managed to establish a small business which provided them with an income that was sufficient for daily survival, yet, they had no opportunities to make any additional investments, as to improve their business or to being able to react to unexpected reverses.

8.3.3 Returnees' perspectives on the reintegration support

While the AVRR programme aims at facilitating both the social and economic re-integration of returnees, the reintegration support was mainly articulated in terms of economic reintegration. Although this economic focus was indeed often the respondents' main concern, as earning an income was perceived as the only way to overcome challenges in many others domains (e.g., housing, medical treatment), this selected focus, and the way it was implemented in practice, did create tensions with returnees' broader needs, with their (lack of) possibilities and with their views on what they consider as supportive in their return and reintegration processes.

First, the main focus on economic reintegration and its realization through non-recurring, short-time and individualized support, disregarded the structural conditions returnees were faced with in their country of origin. The respondents needed to establish an income-generating activity in a context where there were

many barriers to set up and maintain a small scale business (e.g., informal payments, high prices, high taxes, and low and decreasing buying power of people) (Falkingham, 2005). Yet, the social workers guiding the reintegration process could not influence these structural barriers in the particular country's economic and political context (Noll, 1999). The reintegration support thus created hope in the returnees that they would be able to establish an income-generating activity, while as a consequence of the (lack of) available resources and the structural barriers in the country of origin, several returnees did not succeed here and had to stop their business after a while:

> "I understood from the beginning that we could not buy enough material to start, but I was with hope that it would be a good beginning. To start with five computers and then use the profit to buy more. Step by step. But we could only pay for the rent with the profit, so we had to stop. (Georgian man, 25 years)

Nonetheless, several respondents succeeded in establishing a small-scale income-generating activity, which often could generate a small income or food for own consumption. This can be considered a 'survival-oriented business', which prevented the returnee from slipping into worse conditions of poverty (Sinatti, 2015), and was highly important for the respondents. Many respondents thus also stressed that the economically focused reintegration support had made it easier to return: this gave them a reassurance that "something would be there" after return, provided them with perspectives, hope and an immediate direction after return, and was felt as a step forward, a push in the right direction:

> "It helped us very much. Without it, we could not even imagine how we would been able to make our living like this. When you come back from Europe, you have to start from zero, from nothing. And this was already something. (Armenian couple)

> "I added my money [from the project] to a big budget [of a friend]. And I know that my little money will give me only little income in the future. But I know I will have this little per cent, a little income from the profit of this shop and I understand that this is my hope for the future. (Georgian woman, 59 years)

These positive views on the value of this part of the reintegration support were clearly more outspoken compared to participants' views before their return, as at that moment, several respondents expressed their fear that they would never

receive the promised support once returned or expressed their frustrations and worries about the extent of support being insufficient to start a business with.

> Someone in Armenia will administer my budget? Never mind then! (Armenian man, 35 years)

> Is it certain I will receive my money in Armenia? How can I be sure? If I receive this support, I will return to Armenia – if I do not receive support, I am not going anywhere. (Armenian man, 36 years)

After return, none of the respondents mentioned problems to receive the promised budget, yet several indicated that the budget was too small.

Further, several respondents stated that they did not made 'the best investment' with their reintegration support. They made 'the only feasible' investment available, due to the short time frame of the project, the available budget, the absence of own additional resources (e.g., money, people in their social network who can support them to set-up the activity, previous work experiences), and the structural constraints:

> It is not the case that I really want to do this business [selling clothes] because this is a good business, but I have no other choice. (Armenian man, 38 years)

> I can only buy a car and work as taxi driver. Then I will earn one or two euros a day. It is not a good job but I can at least buy bread with that. I cannot use that money to start a shop, you need much more for that. (Georgian man, 44 years)

Consequently, these small businesses had very little margin to cope with reverses or other fluctuations.

Second, there were often tensions between the views of returnees on what could be considered as supportive for their income-generating activity and the administrative requirements of the AVRR programme. Upon return to their country of origin, the respondents felt the need to earn an income as fast as possible, what sometimes created tensions with the fact that their reintegration budget was not immediately available (since it had to be transferred from Belgium to the country of origin), or, since this support is considered as in-kind support, the returnee depended on the social worker to make the needed purchases, which often also caused time delays. However, the requirements of the funders (i.e., the Belgian government and the European Commission) to provide invoices or tickets

from their purchases to control the eligibility of the purchases evoked most of the frustrations. Due to this requirement, the returnees were often obliged to make the purchases in a particular shop where a 'proof of purchase' could be given, instead of on markets where they would normally buy their goods:

> [The Belgian government] wants to help people with this money, they want to improve their businesses, but in this way, we have to pay more than other people for the same products. In this way, they are not helping, we cannot succeed if we need to pay more. It is not good for us. (Armenian man, 37 years)

Third, as a measure to stimulate returnees to make 'sustainable investments', the importance to prepare the income-generating activity, both before their departure and after return, was largely stressed throughout the programme. Yet, many respondents found it challenging to write down their business ideas before their actual return, sometimes because they felt enough familiar with this type of income-generating activity and therefore considered it unnecessary to prepare this; sometimes because they felt it was impossible to prepare this:

> I really want to return, I need to be with my family, but I am not sure at all that I will be safe. I cannot write a business plan, because, first, I have to return and assess the situation in Armenia. Nothing is clear yet. (Armenian man, 36 years)

The time pressure to return because of the difficult living conditions in Belgium further hampered this preparation. Therefore, both before and after return, the possibility to change plans was largely appreciated. Yet, also after return, the need to earn an income as fast as possible and the short time frame of the programme often limited returnees' possibilities to prepare and to take (enough) time to think-through their ideas.

Finally, the focus on supporting income-generating activities created tensions with other needs of the returnees. The respondents' stories revealed that other purchases, not directly linked to their sustainable economic reintegration, were highly important to enhance their wellbeing and quality of live (e.g., renovations of their house, payment of utilities, a visit to the dentist, products of personal hygiene). Therefore, the possibility to spend (a part of) the reintegration budget in a flexible way was largely valued. The respondents herein stressed that they could speak about such needs with the social worker and could discuss together the possibilities within the framework of the AVRR programme.

Accordingly, many returnees highly valued the support and advice they received in overcoming administrative difficulties that were connected with their migration and return process, such as redeeming applications for pension, medical support or the subscription of their children in kindergarten, although none had foreseen these difficulties before their return. Moreover, many respondents expressed appreciation for the overall guidance and support they received throughout the realization of their reintegration projects. Next to the financial support, the fact that they had someone to turn to in this process of return and reintegration, that there was someone who was concerned about their wellbeing, despite the specific nature of the problem, was experienced as highly supportive. They felt approached as 'human beings' by the social workers, in particular as different possibilities could be discussed and their personal wishes were not overlooked:

> [The social workers] helped me. Somehow, it eased my life. (...) It is very important that they treat you like a human, the human approach is very important for me. When you come [to the local partner's office], the hope rises in you again. It is psychologically. It's even not a question of finances, but, psychologically, you are supported, so that's very good. (Armenian woman, 57 years)

> He calls me to ask how I am doing; this means really a lot to me. (Armenian woman, 63 years)

> I was very nervous when I arrived, but he explained me the situation and calmed me down. (Georgian man, 30 years)

8.4 Conclusion

This study provided insight into how reintegration support is implemented within the Belgian AVRR programme, and how this reintegration support is interpreted and evaluated by the programme beneficiaries. Based on the established contradictions or alignments between the programmes' features and the returnees' views on what they considered as supportive in their return and reintegration processes, two concluding points can be made, which entail important implications for the AVRR programmes supporting the return process of these migrants.

First, the results showed that the programme's focus on economic reintegration aligned with the returnees' perspectives of the kind of support that is needed once returned, and made it easier for the respondents to return and restart their lives.

Moreover, the focus on sustainable investments in the preparation of the return in the host country, and in the implementation of the support in the country of origin, often stimulated returnees to consider and think-through their options and decisions. However, the findings also revealed that the AVRR programme's aim of contributing to returnees' reintegration is set without directing attention to the structural factors that shape returnees' possibilities to reintegration in their country of origin (Åkesson & Baaz, 2015; Schuster & Majidi, 2013). This approach ignores the complexity of return process, and creates a narrow view on the needs of returnees. Hence, this leads to unrealistic expectations in the policy discourse of what can be done with the limited and short-term reintegration support, and consequently, to failure to reach the objective of supporting economic reintegration (Cassarino, 2008; Schuster & Majidi, 2013; Van Houte, 2014).

Moreover, the sole focus on reintegration support as a means to facilitate sustainable reintegration, without targeting the broader contexts in which the support needs to be implemented, leads to a strong individualizing approach to the complex social issue of reintegration. Such individualized approach creates the view that failures to reintegrate successfully are the individual responsibility of the migrant who did not take the given opportunities (Clarke, 2005; Schiettecat, 2016). Furthermore, such reasoning alleviates state's responsibility for addressing structural barriers (Sinatti, 2015), and, accordingly, depoliticizes the problems faced by these returnees (Geiger & Pécoud, 2010; Schuster & Majidi, 2013).

Second, returnees' perspectives revealed the importance of the social guidance after return (Van Houte & Davids, 2008), in the enhancement of returnees' wellbeing, and in the implementation of the reintegration support. First, the availability of social workers reassures returnees that they always can rely on somebody, and that this person also concerns about them. Further, the returnees' stories showed how social guidance may create possibilities for the returnees to (re)negotiate and deliberate the implementation of the reintegration support. This renegotiation enables returnees, at first, to adapt their plans to the particular context of the country of origin, which could only be realistically assessed once returned. Secondly, it can create the possibility to acknowledge returnees' needs and their interpretations of what they considered important for their wellbeing (Bouverne-De Bie *et al*., 2014; Schiettecat, 2016).

This does not mean that no rules can or should be set about, amongst other elements, the purchases that are considered eligibly within the AVRR programme or within the context of a specific country of origin. The quality of the support can clearly be improved through installing certain feedback mechanisms about what kind of investments work or do not work in certain contexts (HIT Foundation, 2012). However, based on the findings of what returnees considered as

supportive, we argue that AVRR programmes should be cautious to avoid an one-sited focus on economic reintegration and sustainable investments and strictly pre-structured and predefined eligible types of support, since this may evoke the risk of losing sight of the liveability and dignity of returnees' post-return situations. It was in particular the possibility to negotiate the interpretations of what was supportive for one's reintegration that showed to be a way to connect the programme to returnees' life-worlds and meaning-making processes and respect their dignity. Further, this finding also highlights the major role and importance of the social worker in the host country, as this person functioned as mediator between programme's objectives and the needs, contexts, possibilities and interpretations of the returnee.

Notes

1. We cooperated with the NGO Caritas Belgium as a gateway to possible study participants. Together with the International Organization for Migration, they are the Belgian partners for the implementation of the governmental reintegration support programme.
2. Enhanced reintegration support is also possible for returnees who are considered as vulnerable, yet this support has not further discussed in this article since none of the respondents received this category of support.
3. This article describes the specific content of the Belgium AVRR programme during the period of data collection (2010-2012).
4. The drop-out reasons were: respondents resided permanently or temporarily abroad at the time of the fieldwork (11), respondents ceased participation (4), it was practically impossible to arrange an interview during the time of the field visit (4), and the respondent could not be reached (1).
5. Temporary housing or shelter immediately after arrival was sometimes asked for, and would be possible, yet would mean that the returnee cannot choice the accommodation. Respondents with such request were encouraged to find temporary accommodation within their social network, what seemed to be always possible for these nationalities. Then after the return, a suitable accommodation could be searched.

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9
Perspectives of social workers on their support to returned migrants*

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Abstract

Although social workers in host and home countries provide support to migrants returning to their country of origin through assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programmes, and play a decisive role in their concrete implementation, little is known about the perspectives of the social workers themselves, particularly of those who support returned migrants in the countries of origin. In this article, we look at the perspectives of two social workers who supported the reintegration of 85 migrants once returned from the host country Belgium to their countries of origin, Georgia and Armenia. We examine the interconnection between social work research and the field of migration studies with its focus on transnational practices, to discover the opportunities for exercising discretion in social work as part of the concrete social practice of AVRR. The data shows that social workers' views strongly influenced the implementation of the support, despite the restrictive format of the programme, indicating that this type of 'weak discretion' can be of great significance. Further, the findings reveal that discretion paid a particular role in differentiating the views of social workers from return migration policies, especially concerning the definition of 'good reintegration' and 'good reintegration support', and the programme's eligibility criteria.

9.1 Introduction

Return migration has received renewed attention in migration policies and research (Cassarino, 2004; Markowitz & Stefansson, 2004; Black & Gent, 2006; Sinatti, 2011). Within migration research, return migration is nowadays considered a multi-phased and complex process (Black *et al*., 2004; Ruben, Van Houte, & Davids, 2009), but at the same time also a highly politicized topic. In recent decades, migration policies have paid greater attention to the *voluntary* return of migrants to their country of origin (Black & Gent, 2006; Cassarino, 2008) and to supporting and encouraging it through assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) programmes (Koser, 2001; Webber, 2011). The AVRR programmes provide administrative, logistical and/or financial support to different groups of returnees to help them return to and reintegrate in their country of origin (IOM, 2015a). Two groups of social workers play an important role in the concrete implementation of these governmental programmes, since they provide support to the migrants (potentially) returning to their countries (Carr, 2014). On the one hand, social workers in the European host countries support and advise migrants in deciding whether or not to return and in preparing for their return. They refer migrants to 'reintegration counsellors' when they believe their clients might need additional reintegration assistance alongside the standard travel support (cf. *infra*). On the other hand, for those returnees who are allocated additional assistance, social workers in the countries of origin support them through their reintegration process in the country to which they return.

In many fields, social workers translate policies into concrete practice in their daily work, leading to "practical versions of public policy that can often look quite unlike official pronouncements" (Evans & Harris, 2004, p. 876). In exercising this 'professional discretion' (Lipsky, 1980), practitioners have a certain freedom to make decisions in their work; they interpret government policy in their everyday practice and shape its implementation in a particular setting and context, which are defined by legal frames and structural constraints (Mostowska, 2014). Within their scope of discretion, social workers have differing degrees of freedom to act. Depending on their professional and/or personal values, they may follow dominant practices and perceptions, or question or deviate from them, to the advantage or disadvantage of the client (Dunkerley *et al.*, 2005; Evans & Harris, 2004; Mostowska, 2014).

In the particular field of migration, social workers seem often to be caught between the requirements and eligibility criteria for social support as set by migration policy and legislation, which often relate to a client's residence status,

and, professional ethics that require support to be given to people in need, needs that are often caused by a lack of residence documents and/or (full) citizenship (Cuadra & Staaf, 2014; Dunkerley *et al*., 2005; Jönsson, 2014; Robinson, 2014). Immigration policies often contradict the values and ethics of social work, and social workers are found to adopt different strategies or roles for dealing with such conflicts (Dunkerley *et al*., 2005; Jönsson, 2014; Juhila, 2009). While some scholars criticize the reactionary or uncritical views of social workers on their involvement as instruments of migration control (Humphries, 2004), others indicate the paucity of research on social work responses and practices in relation to migration policy (Shier, Engstrom, & Graham,2011; William & Graham, 2014).

Social work practices assisting migrants who return to their country of origin are characterized by some additional features. They support people whose return is not really voluntary, since most returnees have no legal option to stay. The social workers involved also need to prepare a return to contexts with which they are not familiar and for which they receive limited training and information (Black, Collyer, & Sommerville, 2011; Carr, 2014; Webber, 2011). Those social workers who support the returnees after arrival in their country of origin work within a specific context. First, they need to build their social work practice within the framework of projects created by West-European governments, but which take place in a very different setting. Second, they support the reintegration of countrymen in their shared countries of birth, which puts them in a very different position with the returnees compared to the social workers supporting them in the host countries. Thirdly, although they share the country of birth, they often differ sharply in background experience given the clients' migration experiences.

Migration research strongly emphasizes the interconnectedness of local, national and international levels – of which this social work practice of support to returnees is a perfect illustration, and the cyclic and dynamic character of migration (Castles & Miller, 2009), as also illustrated in this field of return migration. Social work research has, however, focused predominantly on migrants and social workers in host countries (Shier *et al*., 2011), and little is known about social work practices with returnees in the countries of return.

This study therefore examines the perspectives of social workers who are working in the countries of origin of migrants returning through an AVRR programme, and who play, in their social work practice, a decisive role in the implementation of the migration policy initiatives of the host countries. In particular, we investigate social workers' views on return migration and reintegration support, on their roles as social workers in the everyday implementation of reintegration support, and on how their perspectives relate to the return migration policies of the host country. In the final section, these findings are interpreted within the broader framework of professional discretion.

9.2 Methods

9.2.1 Study context: The Belgian AVRR programme

The research questions were explored in the context of the Belgian AVRR programme[1], which is funded and coordinated by the Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil). The programme also receives funding from the European Return Fund to facilitate additional support for returnees who want to start a microbusiness in their home country and for vulnerable people (Fedasil, 2011).

The programme provides support to returnees at two levels. First, 'travel support', outsourced to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), enables the physical return of migrants. It consists of two elements: pre-departure counselling by social workers in refugee reception centres and local social welfare services (support and advice in the return-decision process, information about entry criteria and about the support before and after return, and guidance on acquiring travel documents); and payment of travel-related costs (flight ticket and luggage) (Fedasil, 2011; IOM, 2015b). Second, 'reintegration support' may be added to the 'travel support'. The Belgian government has contracted two 'reintegration partners', IOM and Caritas International Belgium (hereafter referred to as Caritas Belgium), to implement this support. Both collaborate with partner organizations in the countries to which migrants return. The reintegration support consists of several elements. In Belgium, the returnee receives information about the scope and conditions of the support, and his/her reintegration plan is prepared and sent to the local partner organization to check its feasibility. Reintegration plans set the modalities for spending the reintegration support money, and generally aim at facilitating small-scale, individual projects which help returnees to restart their lives and to reintegrate in the country of origin, for example in training and schooling, in legal, administrative or psychological support, in job placement, or accommodation, furniture, transport, medical support and income-generating activities (Fedasil, 2010). After return, a practitioner of the partner organization in the country of origin gives the returnee administrative and financial support, and guidance on how to use the allocated reintegration budget (Fedasil, 2009, 2011). Reintegration support comprises 'in-kind' support, which means that the returnee is allocated a 'reintegration budget', but does not receive this amount in cash. The purchases and payments of goods and services with the reintegration budget of the returnee are done by, or together with the local practitioner, after a joint re-evaluation of the reintegration plans as set before return by the practitioner and the returnee**.** This way of working is installed in order to collect receipts of each purchase and to make sure the budget is used for types of support that are considered eligible within the programme. The reintegration support

lasts from six months up to one year after return. The local partner monitors the returnee's situation through home visits and meetings. Once the support is finished, he/she writes a report on the guidance and financial support, including receipts for purchases, for the Belgian reintegration partner, as part of the latter's obligations to the Belgian government and the European Commission (Caritas International, 2014; Fedasil, 2010). At the time of the data collection (2010-2012), both asylum seekers and rejected asylum seekers, and undocumented migrants could receive the travel support. The reintegration support, however, was only accessible for (rejected) asylum seekers deemed 'vulnerable' or able to start an income-generating activity, and for undocumented migrants from particular countries of origin who had resided for at least one year in Belgium or had received an order to leave the country (for a detailed overview and current changes in these eligibility criteria, see Lietaert, Broekaert, & Derluyn, 2016).

9.2.2 Data collection and analysis

This study forms part of a larger longitudinal study in which we followed the return and reintegration trajectories of 85 migrants returning to Armenia and Georgia with support from Caritas Belgium, which usually works with social workers to implement the reintegration support in the countries of origin. We examined the perspectives of two local social workers who implemented the reintegration support in each country to the 85 returnees (50 Armenian and 35 Georgian). During nine field visits to Armenia and Georgia (total period of stay was about three months), detailed field notes were taken about observations of social workers' guidance of returnees, and of the researcher's conversations with the social workers about their everyday practices in assisting returnees. In a semi-structured interview with each social worker at the end of the support (one interview conducted in English, the other in Russian with a translator), the social workers were asked to reflect on their job and on its current way of implementation, in order to listen to their evaluation of the support provided to the individual returnees. In preparation of each interview, our field notes of the observations of, and our reflections on, the social workers' practices were scanned again to collect 'markers' (e.g., examples of observed difficulties of struggles during the guidance, interesting reflections about the guidance or about decisions regarding the support) (Neuman, 2006) for further discussion during the interviews.

The participants had respectively seven and three years' experience in guiding returnees, but had already worked for the local NGO for a longer period of time. Although hired and employed as social workers, they did not have a social work diploma or previous social work experience. They were working in countries that gained their independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union and were

characterized by recent or ongoing armed conflicts, high emigration rates, and poor socio-economic and unstable political conditions (Gevorkyan, Marshuryan, & Gevorkyan, 2006; Hofmann & Buckley, 2012). In this context, the profession of social worker is relatively new, as in most post-Soviet countries (Brogden, 2010; Iarskaia-Smirnova & Romanov, 2002).

All field notes and literally transcribed interviews were analysed thematically (Howitt & Cramer, 2007), using NVivo 10 to code, recode and distinguish substantial sets of codings and integrate them into meaningful patterns of themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process led to three themes that appeared central in the respondents' job descriptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006), covering respondents' views on (1) return, reintegration and reintegration support; (2) their job content and strategies for implementing reintegration support; and (3) good reintegration support and successful return processes. Finally, all themes were reviewed, interpreted beyond the respondents' descriptions, and linked with theoretical insights and the literature on discretion (Patton, 1990).

9.3 Findings

9.3.1 Views on return, reintegration and reintegration support

In our conversations with the social workers about their everyday practice in assisting returnees, they revealed nuanced and sometimes even contradictory perspectives on return and reintegration. This became apparent in how the respondents looked at the voluntariness of their clients' return: they recognized that returnees chose to return under the threat of possible deportation, but that, although constrained, the decision also contained an important element of choice.

> "Still they choose the option to come back with assistance. They also have the choice to stay illegally. But why do they not choose to stay? (…) They understand that it is a hard life: I need to hide, maybe the police will catch me and I will be deported. But if I return now, they'll give me something. Believe me, it is their decision! When they don't have this own decision, they will never do it. Maybe they don't return, maybe they think, this assistance is nothing, and I will find more here.

One social worker strongly emphasized the need for returnees themselves to decide to return, because they might then be better able to deal with difficulties and with unexpected developments in the return process. He stressed that people who were returned by force could be aggressive towards him, rendering his work impossible.

Both respondents stressed the economic aspect of returnees' reintegration process: reintegration is being able to provide your own livelihood (earn enough for living, have a sufficiently equipped house and be able to pay for utilities), and maintain your family. Above all, the respondents saw a person as 'reintegrated' when he started to feel comfortable in his country and with his relatives and was not thinking about remigrating. In this regard, one respondent said that 'reintegration' was not really the right concept, because in his country, returnees did not need to 're-enter in the social structures of their original community' (Dimitrijevic, Todorovic, & Grkovic, 2004):

> "It will always be like that, we will never be able to eliminate it: we always try to connect with each other, we never lose contact with relatives, classmates and neighbours. It is normal for us. All returnees answer the same: after one week back, it is like you were not abroad.

Consequently, returnees do not need to be supported in the re-establishment of social networks, which one might usually read as part of the concept of 'reintegration'. However, although returnees do not need support to reintegrate, they still need support to return and restart their lives.

Both respondents said that returnees needed to realize that the reintegration support they received was not self-evident from the side of the Belgian government, and that they should thus respect the opportunity they had been given. According to the interviewees, such an attitude amongst returnees enlarged their feelings of responsibility towards their own reintegration project and facilitated collaboration with the social worker. But one respondent questioned whether reintegration support should be limited just to 'voluntary migrants':

> "Whether people are deported or return voluntarily, the only difference is the stamp in their passport. These people all left for the same reasons, they return, they have nothing here, and they all need support.

The reintegration support could even facilitate the return process for people who would like to return, but were deterred by feelings of shame about returning empty-handed:

> When you understand that you want to go back, and somebody tells you that your return home will be not only back home, but your return will also be useful for you, useful for your family, and, if you decide to go back, it will be okay for you, because there will be a reintegration budget (…) money and some material things, it is very important to feel yourself satisfied. It will be like my apology for somebody, for my family who I left behind and was without me.

At the same time, the social workers recognized the constrained possibilities of the reintegration support provided:

> In fact, I find this kind of support very good. Though the problem is that, thanks to this support, people manage the first months after return, they have an apartment, they receive medical support, but those who cannot establish a working business, go back to the point that they can't survive and start thinking again about leaving.

In particular, the economic orientation of the reintegration support could not solve other (political) problems returnees might have; for these challenges, support to reintegrate was deemed impossible or even useless. In the next section, we will shed light on the concrete achievements of reintegration support and the respondents' interpretation of their particular tasks and roles.

9.3.2 Social work practice: Between rules and realities

The social workers explained that their first task was to receive the migrants after their return and to explain to them the rules and conditions of the AVRR programme, to make sure that the returnees knew and respected them. 'We have rules and the people need to respect them. I do not indulge.' This emphasis on pursuing norms and rules is often referred to as taking a conformist position in social work (Jönsson, 2014) or implying submissive strategies (Mostowska, 2014).

As their second task, the respondents indicated that, together with the returnee, they needed to examine how the allocated reintegration budget could be spent in the best possible way. They stressed that they did not always follow returnees' first wishes, but integrated their personal judgement about 'good' support into the way the support was used (Evans & Harris, 2004). Nevertheless, this personal judgement still had to conform with the programme's rules, which could lead to conflicting situations, since both respondents stressed that their main task was to defend the returnee's interests and to be 'at the side of the returnee':

> I am pleased with my work, when both the returnee and the [local organization's] project supervisor are happy. I find myself in between. Maybe the returnee wants to spend his money as soon as possible, but the coordinator says that this is impossible, because we need to follow the procedures, and I understand both. I try to reconcile both perspectives.

The social workers also found themselves in conflicting situations between the allocation of the budget, as made up by the social workers in Belgium, and their own views:

> There are often people coming from Belgium and receiving business support who do not need it. However, we don't have any choice, we have to give them the money, because they already have a contract.

Both respondents shared the view that a needs assessment could only be done once a person had returned, and they therefore would have liked to have broader opportunities to diverge from the decisions made in Belgium about the budget allocations:

> It's difficult. There are people who need more help, but they cannot get more support because of the criteria, and others, they are attributed a business budget, while they have no experience or motivation to do something. (…) It would be better if they only promised a certain minimum in Belgium, so we can see who needs more support and who doesn't.

Still, one interviewee expressed his doubts about assuming this responsibility for the allocation of support:

> Some do need more, others don't. But the problem is, if we enlarge somebody's budget, this news will spread very easily and others will come to us to demand the same.

More discretion in a setting with limited resources could thus place the social worker in a difficult position, giving them "the freedom to decide which one of a range of equally 'needy' people receives a service" (Evans & Harris, 2004, p.889). In this particular context, social workers are thus sometimes reluctant to exercise more discretion so as to avoid accusations of favouritism (Evans, 2013).

As their third task, the social workers saw themselves as responsible for being there for the returnees, to be a person that they could bother, with whom they could share personal stories. One respondent described this as being returnees' psychologist: "I am sometimes their psychologist too because they always speak

to me about their problems, their relationship with their wife… they tell a lot." The social workers understood what returnees went through in Belgium, because they participated in the yearly meetings in Brussels, organized by Caritas Belgium, where different local partners are invited to discuss the content and development of the AVRR programme, to exchange experiences and to visit reception facilities for asylum applicants (Caritas International, 2014). They also understood their struggles upon return, because of their extensive experience in working with returnees. Most returnees were not able to maintain their connections with Belgium, which made the social worker their sole linkage with their migration background:

> "Sometimes, I understand that for them, I am a bridge. A bridge between Belgium and [this country]. They ask me: "Will you go to Belgium? If you will be in Belgium, I will give you a number and you can call them and say hallo from me".

9.3.3 Views on 'good' reintegration support and 'successful' return processes

The respondents considered 'good reintegration support' to be making sure that the budget was spent in the best possible way: used for people who needed the support and who took responsibility for using the budget well. Social workers tried to achieve this by making realistic plans with the returnees, and by encouraging them to think about what they really needed. To that end, they firstly listened to their client and tried to enable him/her attain his/her goals:

> "This person wants to have cows, so I make sure he is able to buy these cows! Otherwise, he builds a stable and when finished, he can only buy one animal.

But at the same time, they also steered returnees in a certain direction, intentionally using their power to change the way the support would be spent, and to increase the returnee's motivation and sense of responsibility:

> We did a very good thing with one returnee! Because, when he came here, I did not trust him, he was only three months in Belgium, and I had the feeling that he was lying to us. I don't know why, but it was my feeling. I decided to tell him that he only had part of the budget, that he had to start and prove to Belgium he deserved the second part. He started and he brought me all the needed papers, and asked: "Please come and see my shop and write to Belgium that I am working and that I am not lazy". He got the second part, and his business works very well.

Or in some cases, the returnee had difficulty in deciding, and the social worker decided for him/her:

> I tried to let her think about what she really needs. And she asked me: "Can it be a washing machine?" And I said: "Yes of course", because it is not luxury, not if you buy a simple washing machine, and you know her condition, she cannot wash by hand. And then she said: "Maybe this, maybe that", and I said: "Washing machine! It will be okay for you, for you sister, for the husband of your sister, maybe for your grandchild". She was crying in the shop, and said: "By myself, I cannot decide to do this".

In most cases the social worker and returnee determined the use of the budget together, clearly the most favourable scenario. Yet, social workers' discretion and right of decision were limited, in particular when clients did not accept any kind of steering or advice:

> For this family, I have the feeling, I cannot do anything, because I try to explain to them that maybe they don't need such item, maybe we can do something else (…), but they are like a train on rails. They go that way, they don't want to move something. I would prefer for them another way, but what can I say? I don't have such big responsibility to say "no"!

One respondent explained that when he did not manage to convince the returnee of the proposed changes, they were bound to the Belgian contract: "I told you, I try to change the returnees' mind sometimes, but if not? Ok, we have a rule! And we go like a train".

In any case, how to spend a budget depended on the personal situation of each returnee, which meant that supporting returning migrants demanded a tailored approach. This individualized approach started from the insight the social workers must have into the situation and into the returnee's needs in order to understand their wishes and plans for utilising the reintegration budget:

> Sometimes, it is very difficult too; sometimes you think that someone lies to you because they don't want to tell some things, but if you, step by step by step, go into his history and his life, you understand what is important.

Developing a view of clients' situation required openness and honesty from the clients, but also an established relationship of trust between social worker and client:

> It depends from person to person, how you need to work with them. It is my opinion that, in order to work with someone, first, you need to create a bond, only after that, you can start talking about how much money you will use for this or that.

Establishing a relationship, however, requires time, which was often not there within the short time frame of the programme. One possible solution here is that contact between social worker and returnee is already established before the returnee's departure from the host country.

The interviewees stated that the quality of their assistance depended strongly on the social worker's credibility and his knowledge about what does and does not work. For this purpose, social workers needed to build upon their experience, continuous reflection with colleagues and their own insights into human nature:

> It is your own feeling, you have to follow your feeling. And when you meet some person and he asks for a car, you understand that this is the only possibility for him. But when [name of returnee] comes and says "I want a taxi", I say no! It would be such a foolish thing, because he would not be a good driver. He is too nervous.

Both respondents thus largely emphasized the social character of their work and the importance of taking a professional attitude, which involved finding a common language with each returnee and being available, non-judgemental and, foremost, very patient (Banks, 2001). This is mirrored in an observation by a returnee[2] in which one also can read the impact of the particular post-Soviet context, characterized by a general atmosphere of distrust and corruption and by social work being a relatively new profession:

> I am thankful to the social worker because every time I needed his help, he came to me. Don't be surprised because all [our nationals] hesitate somehow, they lost their belief in services somehow.

How the social workers evaluated the impact of the reintegration support they gave depended upon the satisfaction of the returnees (satisfaction with the support, and needs and wants being met), and whether the support had led to some improvement in people's lives and to solutions for at least some difficulties. Interestingly, the interviewees stressed the value added when the support benefitted not only the returnee, but also his/her family members – or even only the family members. This signifies a broader interpretation of the possible impact of reintegration support than the AVRR programme's focus on supporting just returning individuals:

> Maybe his support was not successful; he is a drug user and ended up in jail. But when we throw away the ideas of '[this returnee's] reintegration assistance', we helped his family! It is also good. Maybe not for [him] (changes his mind immediately), maybe also for [him]! Because [he] will come home and have bread because the family is working! We understand that we did not only help [him], but three or four persons.

The limited budget, together with the generally difficult living contexts in Armenia and Georgia, meant that even a realistic plan and a well spent budget were no guarantee of successful reintegration:

> We all know that the budget is not so high to start a business with. And the smaller the budget, the higher the risk that the business will fail. And the instability and corruption in the country make everything unpredictable, there is no guarantee that a good business today will still work next year. There are no laws here. It depends from person to person, and there seems to be no pattern. People need to have some luck from different sides.

The respondents clearly indicated that the host country actors involved sometimes neglected the context of the country to which migrants return. They expressed strong feelings of powerlessness when they were confronted with unfair but unchangeable challenges in their country's socio-political situation:

> They came to investigate the possibilities for people to get [a specific] treatment here. We visited hospitals, and different chiefs said that they had no place to treat returnees. They said to the representatives of the [Belgian] ministry, that, if they would send extra people, they would not be able to accept them. I wanted to show them that this situation exists here. But they answered that these people have to return anyway.

9.4 Discussion

Our study provides insights into social workers' perspectives on return migration and reintegration support and their role therein. The insights add to existing knowledge of social work practice with migrants, in particular returning migrants, and to our understanding of the way discretion is used in this social work practice.

Discretion is a fundamental element of the work of front-line professionals (Evans & Harris, 2004; Lipsky, 1980). Social workers in front-line positions support people who demand flexible and situational responses to their sometimes unpredictable and variable needs. As Lipsky argues, discretion is also an essential part of social workers' practice, since policy rules and procedures are not always clear or directly implementable. This is certainly the case in the social work practices our respondents are involved in, since these social workers, supporting returned migrants in the country of origin, need to translate the very general, globally implemented and decontextualized rules and conditions of the Belgian AVRR programme into the specific context of the country they are working in and solve practical problems within the given sets of rules and procedures. This particular nature of human services, together with the vagueness of policy, creates spaces for practitioners to subvert, bend or work around organizational rules (Lipsky, 1980). Studies of discretion in social work practice often emphasize the existence or non-existence of social workers' explicit strategies to 'distort, subvert, bend or work around' rules (Broadhurst *et al*., 2010; Dunkerley *et al*., 2005; Evans, 2013), the exercise of so-called 'strong' discretion (Evans & Harris, 2004). Our analysis of the implementation of the AVRR programme by social workers operating in the countries to which migrants return has shown that these social workers do not consciously work around the rules, but stay within the imposed frame, as determined by restricted budgets, time limits, procedures and eligibility criteria:

> "I know it has to be in this way, so I try to do everything to put it in this frame. I don't think: "How would it be possible if we could do it differently?"

> "Very occasionally, I can be bothered by this [rule], though normally not, because we always find a way to solve any problem.

Lacking strong discretion to bend the rules, the social workers could only use so-called 'weak' discretion and interpret the rules within the programme's framework (Evans & Harris, 2004). Yet, we should not underestimate the influence of this weak discretion on day-to-day social work practice. The data show how the social workers included their own opinions about 'good' reintegration support in their work, thereby emphasizing both the economic and

social components of their job. This social component was considered inevitable and is related to the need to take up different roles in their function of social worker supporting the reintegration process (i.e., assessor of needs, controller, caregiver, therapist, trust person, service provider (Juhila, 2009), and, quite specifically, a 'bridge' between host and home country). While the programme's framework restricted their freedom to make their own decisions, the findings illustrate how their views on 'good' reintegration support were central to the way they implemented the support. According to Evans and Harris (2004), this 'style of work', the way in which things are done, strongly affects the quality of services and is therefore central to the service provided and to service users. We endorse their argument that this weak form of discretion is highly significant and, therefore, equally important for our understanding of the way discretion is used in social work practice.

The discretion social workers brought into their work led to differing views on 'good reintegration support' between social workers and AVRR policy. First, the social workers strongly emphasized the need for and benefit of a social approach to reintegration support, which they aimed to realize through taking a specific stance as a social worker. The AVRR programme, by contrast, only demanded budgetary completion and reports on the reintegration assistance, and did not require reintegration support to have social components.

Second, the respondents indicated possible differences between 'good reintegration support' and 'good reintegration'. The social workers' evaluation of 'good reintegration support' contained multiple elements (e.g., satisfaction of the returnee, well-considered and shared decision-making with the returnee about the use of the budget, and improvement of living conditions), yet these elements were not always realized simultaneously, and social workers often attached more importance to the process of the reintegration support than to its outcome. This means that even 'the best possible investment' is not always sufficient for a returnee to reintegrate, which can lead to difference in how social workers and returnees evaluate the support. The perspectives of social workers on 'good reintegration support' also clearly differs from the outcome-oriented goals of the AVRR programme (although the aim of Western governments may even be only to encourage people to return, without any goal of reintegration [Cassarino, 2008]).

Third, the interviewed social workers held broad views on 'good reintegration support', since they also looked at, for example, the benefits of the reintegration support for family members, a view which contradicted the AVRR programme's focus on the individual returnee, as set in its rules that purchases could only be made for the returnee (Fedasil, 2010). This broader interpretation, as also social workers' evaluation of the outcome of the support within the framework of the limited resources of the AVRR programme, the country context and the client's

opportunities and attitudes, three elements on which they have little impact, could be seen as a way of justifying the tension created by their discretion.

Discretion is also an important theme in the question of who is eligible for support. This question places social workers in the countries of origin in a similar position to that of social workers in the host country: both are caught between the eligibility criteria for social support, as set by the return policy, and their own professional ethics, which require support to be provided to all people in need. Elderly people, for example, may need support to be able to acquire an income, but are then sometimes excluded from additional reintegration support because their plans are insufficiently 'business-oriented' (Kothari & Hulme, 2004). Equally, excluding migrants from particular types of support based on time- and procedure-dependent criteria (as a means of 'stimulating' more migrants to return voluntarily and faster) does not meet people's needs (Poghosyan, 2012). It also implies that the periods in which social workers can give support, both before and after return, are very short, which can have a negative impact on the ability to realize 'good' reintegration support.

9.4.1 Implications

Our findings stress the need to enable social workers responsible for the implementation of the reintegration component in AVRR programmes to exercise discretion (Black *et al*., 2011; Koser, 2001), because they are more familiar with the particular contexts in which the reintegration support is implemented, because of the added value their position gives to searching for the best possible way to spend the allocated reintegration budget for each returnee, and because return and reintegration must be seen as processes which change over time. These elements place emphasis on allowing scope to alter the plans for reintegration support as set before the return. This greater flexibility in the allocated reintegration budget might enable the support to be better tailored to the returnee's needs and to the specific context of reintegration, and thus lead to higher quality reintegration support, better outcomes and more satisfaction for both returnee and social worker. The respondents' emphasis on a social relationship between returnee and social worker as an essential element of good reintegration support highlights the need to integrate this element into the support provided in AVRR programmes, alongside the current mainly bureaucratic focus. Clearly distinguishing between 'good reintegration' and 'good reintegration support' in AVRR programmes' objectives could also be an important step towards determining clearer and more holistic methods of evaluation, which is now seldom integrated into AVRR programmes (Black *et al*., 2011; Koser, 2001).

Notes

1. This article describes the specific content of the Belgium AVRR programme during the period of data collection (2010-2012).
2. This quote was taken from a study of the return and reintegration process for returnees who returned with the support of the Belgian AVRR programme and were guided by the two social workers interviewed in this paper.

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10
The lived experiences of migrants in detention*

*Based on Lietaert, I., Broekaert, E., & Derluyn, I. (2015). The lived experiences of migrants in detention. *Population, Space and Place*, *21*(6), 568–579.

Abstract

The detention and deportation of (undocumented) non-citizens has become one of the political priorities in the realization of states' internal migration control. The increase in detention and deportation of migrants raises questions about these practices' implicit functions and their impact on the migrants subjected to detention. This paper aims to contribute to our understanding of the contemporary expansion of immigration detention by focusing on detained migrants' lived experiences and perspectives on detention practices. On the basis of interviews with 31 detainees in Belgian detention centres, we explore how migrants' self-perceptions relate to current legal and societal discourses. By referring to their connections with the host country through material, familial or emotional ties, the interviewees strongly oppose their detention and upcoming deportation. Thereby, they bring the (contested) experience of belonging firmly to the centre of this paper, referring to the connection between 'body' and 'place'. They also point to the large and growing gap between their lived experiences on the one hand and the realities and political discourses of (legal) belonging on the other. In addition, detainees' lived experiences shed light onto the burden and consequences of lacking citizenship, and, simultaneously, demonstrate how individuals try to assert alternative, identity-based claims, and/or deny – or at least avoid – the idea of deportation. We hereby hypothesize that this denial, as also the growing gap between detainees' own perspectives and policy and public discourses might have a major impact on migrants' wellbeing and their reintegration processes back 'home'.

10.1 Introduction

The detention and deportation of 'noncitizens', people who do not or no longer have the legal right to reside on a state's territory, was for long a less important, secondary instrument of migration control (Gibney, 2008). As an intervention surrounded by practical and moral controversies, the deportation of migrants was rarely implemented and higher priority was given to the prevention of new ('illegal') arrivals. However, since the mid-1990s, an overall shift has occurred, rendering the detention and deportation of undocumented migrants one of the highest political priorities in western European states (Bloch & Schuster, 2005; Anderson, Gibney, & Paoletti, 2011). In order to maintain and enforce the 'integrity' of states' immigration and asylum systems and their right to control who enters and remains on their territory, governments started to tighten up their detention and deportation policies and expand their detention capacity with the intention of increasing the number of effective expulsions of irregular migrants and rejected asylum seekers (de Giorgi, 2006; van Kalmthout, 2007).

This proliferation of detention and deportation, the so-called deportation turn (Gibney, 2008), illustrates the shift in the discourse from detention and deportation as 'exceptional measures in crisis situations' towards their being 'normal', or even 'banal', and 'essential' state instruments of immigration control (Bloch & Schuster, 2005). Thereby, detention practices might also serve more implicit or informal social functions (Leerkes & Broeders, 2010). First, detention needs to deter illegal migration. Second, detaining migrants can relieve public order of disturbances associated with migrant poverty and, more broadly, serve as a measure for managing and controlling specific 'marginalized' populations in society (Wacquant, 2012). Third, this increase in detention capacity can be considered an attempt by governments to address the public's perceived anxieties about 'unwanted' migration, allowing states to demonstrate to their citizens that they are still able to control their geographic and social borders. As well, these symbolic functions of detention illustrate how detention ostentatiously separates (legal) 'citizens' from (undocumented) 'non-citizens'; the latter presented as a 'dangerous' category or as 'bogus asylum seekers', who 'abuse the (asylum) system' and 'undermine European societies' core values' (Yuval-Davis, Anthias, & Kofman, 2005; Silverman & Massa, 2012) and need to be removed from the territory to assure the nation's safety (Bloch & Schuster, 2005).

This analysis of current policies in the field of undocumented migration leaves open the question of the impact of these developments on detained migrants' wellbeing and how migrants in detention position themselves within this discourse. This gap results partly from difficulties in gaining access to detention

centres and, as a consequence, from current research often holding a view from 'above', unwittingly excluding migrants' lived experiences (De Genova, 2002; Bosworth, 2012). The harmful impact of detention on migrants' mental and physical health has been proven (Silove, Steel, & Watters, 2000; Silverman & Massa, 2012), as well as that detention practices govern bodies and shape subjectivities (Griffiths, 2012; Klein & Williams, 2012). At the same time, other studies have revealed how detained migrants, despite their constrained position, seek to resist and attempt to negotiate power relations (Bosworth, 2012; Derluyn *et al*., 2014). They thereby, amongst others, create spaces of belonging that supersede legal citizenship (Bosniak, 2006; Swain, 2007), with belonging being a thicker concept than 'citizenship', because it not only entails membership, rights, and duties but also emotions evoked by such membership (Yuval-Davis *et al*., 2005).

The special issue of Population, Space and Place [18(6), 2012] on immigration detention stressed the need to understand and interpret the contemporary expansion of immigration detention in liberal, democratic states (Silverman & Massa, 2012), amongst other methods by including detainees' lived experiences and their perspectives on detention practices. This will enlarge our understanding of the detention phenomenon (Willen, 2007) and will reveal possible disjuncture between expectations of migration processes, produced through dominant discourses, and migrants' actual lived realities (Chavez, 1991; Lawson, 2000). Moreover, personal experiences challenge the 'collective story', contest the over-generalization and de-individualization promoted by policy discourses and shed light on the personal, social and political realities, on the ambiguities and moral dilemmas people are confronted with (Eastmond, 2007). This paper therefore aims at unravelling the lived experiences of migrant detainees, and in particular, their perspectives on their detention and upcoming return to their home country, by connecting their perspectives with interdisciplinary literature on citizenship, place, and belonging, allowing us to explore how their self-perceptions relate to current legal and societal discourses.

10.2 Methods

Semi-structured interviews were held with 31 migrants in four out of five detention centres in Belgium.[1] Because of the familiarity of the interviewer (first author) with Georgian and Armenian migrants residing in Belgium, and thus to enhance the 'readability' of the interviews (Edwards, 1998; Bosworth, 2012), we chose to limit our sample to Georgian and Armenian detainees. From 2010 to 2012, respectively 6,553, 7,034, and 6,797 persons were confined annually in Belgian detention centres (DVZ, 2013). Although absolute numbers of detainees'

nationalities are not available, reports indicate that a much higher proportion of undocumented Armenian migrants intercepted by the police (61% of the Armenian intercepted migrants versus 19% of all intercepted migrants) are transferred to detention[2] (CGKR, 2012a). Although detention does not immediately involve deportation, the number of deported Georgian and Armenian migrants has been notably high in recent years. In 2010, the number of deported Georgian nationals rose to 12th place (n =71) in the nationalities of deported 'foreigners' and stabilized afterwards in 20th place in 2011 (n =44) and 2012 (n =52), whereas Armenian nationals experienced a remarkable rise from 20th place in 2010 (n =36) to 7th place in 2011 (n =123) and 2012 (n =146) (CGKR, 2012b, 2013).

All Georgian and Armenian migrants who were detained in one of the four centres at the time of the visits (August and October 2012) were asked to participate: one person refused (cf. *infra*). Three centres were visited twice; the fourth cancelled the second visit because of ongoing insurgency in the centre. In total, 29 interviews with 31 migrants (27 singles and 2 couples; 25 men and 6 women) were carried out. All participants had been arrested during random identity checks on the streets, in targeted arrest actions at their houses or after being called to the police station. Twenty-nine participants were arrested and placed in detention because they were staying on Belgian territory without legal documents; two interviewees stated they still had a valid Schengen visa. All but two had previously applied for asylum (two of them in France and the others in Belgium) but had received (recently, months, or even years ago) a negative answer (rejection or Dublin referral). With a duration of stay in Belgium ranging from 10 days to 15 years (mean: 4.8 years; median: 3.5 years), the respondent group varied a lot with regard to the time they had lived in Belgium. The migrants mentioned a range of motives for their migration to Belgium[3]:political motives or personal safety (n =16), improving of their living conditions (n =4), medical treatment (n =3), family reunion (n =2), and familial problems (n =2).

Preceding the visit, a social worker from the centre gave each potential participant a letter, written in their mother tongue, which explained the research aim and stressed the confidentiality and anonymity of the study. When the interviewer visited the centre, all the potential participants were one by one invited for interview and brought to a separate room together with the interviewer. One woman refused to meet the researcher because, as we found out later, she thought that the meeting had been set up to 'control her'.[4] Research aims and conditions were clarified again and after receiving the interviewees' oral informed consent, the interview started and, when consented to, was audiotaped (n =27). Some interviewees (n =9) preferred to have the interview without an interpreter (thus held in Dutch, French, or English), whereas others (n =20) agreed to an

interpreter fluent in Armenian and Russian (the latter for Georgian detainees). Each interview lasted between 15 and 90 minutes. At the end of the interview, at our request, each respondent, except one, agreed to share his/her contact details so as to enable us to contact them within 2 months and follow their experiences. The single non-consenting participant explained that he judged it of little use to give his contact information, because he was convinced at that time that he would no longer be alive. Besides the interviews with the respondents, detailed field notes were taken to register extra information (such as impressions and non-verbal communication) that could not be captured directly during the interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

We should acknowledge that interviewing a vulnerable group such as undocumented migrants, certainly in the restrictive context of detention centres, may have important limitations (Black *et al.*, 2006; Griffiths, 2012). Because these respondents have fewer political rights and are not in a position to control the fate of their stories, considerable more sensitivity needs to be shown to questions of power, confidentiality, and accountability (Leaning, 2001; Jacobsen & Landau, 2003).

As first limitation, the migrants may be deeply distrustful or suspicious of researchers, or anyone who appears in an 'official' capacity (Black *et al*., 2006), which can be a consequence of their experiences in the country of origin and/or the (multiple) confrontation with the general 'culture of disbelief', inherent to the restrictive immigration policies, with which their stories have been looked at (Eastmond, 2007). This potentially decreases their willingness to participate or influences their answers, hoping these might enhance their chances of release or attract public attention to their plight (Black *et al*., 2006; Silove *et al*., 2000). Although only one of the selected migrants refused to participate, we did encounter differences in how willing and open the participants were to share their stories and in their motivations for doing so (curiosity, distraction, and deep desire to speak up about their story) This may also explain the variable lengths of the interviews, which may have affected the amount of information we received from different participants, and thus also particular themes that were more or less stressed throughout the interviews. To tackle these constraints and prevent the creation of unrealistic expectations of the research (Leaning, 2001), we paid careful attention to informing participants about the study's aims, its anonymity, and its confidentiality; and we repeatedly stressed the interviewer's independence from the migration authorities, including that their participation in the study would not influence (negatively nor positively) their immigration case (and thus also their possible upcoming deportation). However, these clarifications may not always have taken away distrust or prevented talking about their

detention experiences from reinforcing participants' belief in its injustice and refreshing their hopes of being released.

A second limitation of this study, which also could have impacted on the data, is the use of interpreters. It was a conscious choice to work with only one interpreter, originating from the same region as the respondents, firstly to ensure similar translations throughout the interviews; secondly, to improve trust and cooperation in the participant-researcher relationship (Edwards, 1998); and thirdly, to overcome not only language but also cultural barriers between the (Belgian) researcher and the respondents (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003). However, the interpreter's profile, as a person from the same region but at the same time someone with a permanent residence permit in Belgium, may also influence the interpreter–respondent interaction (which could possibly induce feelings of envy, failure, or injustice), as well as the gender difference between the female interpreter/researcher and the primarily male respondents (Edwards, 1998). Following Edwards (1998), we believe it is impossible to erase the potential influence of interpreter's and/or interviewer's profiles and that therefore, one should not try to make them 'invisible' but encompass a reflexive evaluation of them when analysing the data. To that end, questions and answers were retranslated afterwards when hesitations or emotions were noticed in the interpreter, interviewer, or respondent during the interview.

An ethical dilemma in this study design was that our interviews might revive hard feelings related to earlier interview experiences in the course of respondents' immigration trajectory (Klein & Williams, 2012). To minimize this risk, we did not focus on precise legal facts but primarily on migrants' own lived experiences, and participants could also decline any question they did not feel comfortable with. Still, we recognize that 'doing no harm' in this context, as in similar research contexts, is difficult to anticipate or control (Leaning, 2001; Jacobsen & Landau, 2003). It seemed extremely important therefore to act as an 'ethical researcher' (Vandekinderen, Roets, & Van Hove , 2014), meaning that the researcher sometimes reacted to appeals from respondents (Vervliet, 2013) when this action might in some way make a difference to their wellbeing (Leaning, 2001). Concretely, this involved, when invoked, our passing respondents' worries or need for information to social workers in the detention centre or offering help when possible (cf. *infra*: field notes, August 2012).

All interviews were literally transcribed and analysed using the code-and-retrieve software programme NVivo 10 (Mortelmans, 2011). The experiences and perspectives of the detainees were grouped into three major meaningful themes and subjects (thematic analyses: Howitt & Cramer, 2007), which are presented later.

10.3 Entering the detention centre

First and foremost, we wanted to explore during the interviews detainees' perspectives on their imprisonment, how they viewed the return to the country of origin, and how they 'prepared' themselves for their banishment from the host society and return to their home country. The interview themes that we planned to talk about with the detained migrants were thus, broadly speaking, their migration story, their life in Belgium and their perspectives on detention and return. We therefore started all interviews by talking with the migrants about their upcoming forced return to their home country. However, almost all interviewees did not want to speak about this topic, expressing clearly, as a common thread through all themes, that the upcoming repatriation was simply unimaginable. The respondents did speak about their arrest and detention, and when the issue of returning to the country of origin was raised, they spoke about the reasons why they could not return. In the succeeding texts, we cluster the empirical data therefore around the three themes that were brought up by the respondents, which differed from the themes we expected.

10.3.1 Arrest and detention

Although the official policy discourse describes the arrest and detention of undocumented migrants as logical consequences of their 'illegal' residence on the territory, several interviewees experienced their arrest as a complete surprise, being unaware of their risk of being detained, often because they believed their ongoing procedures (in particular the procedure for 'regularization) would prevent them from being deported (which is not the case). This surprise may also indicate that some did not (always) view themselves as 'undocumented', because this status might, on a daily basis, have been rather irrelevant to most of their activities and relationships. However, this 'illegal reality' was now, through the arrest and detention, suddenly superimposed onto their daily lives (Coutin, 2000). Other interviewees said that they were warned about possible deportation but did not believe they were at risk themselves. Still, other participants had already been detained previously.

> " Yes I knew. My friends told me that they would come and get me one day, but I did not believe them. I thought it was not possible because this country knows very well, if they send me back, I will be killed. (male, 19 years)

Arrest and detention is experienced as an entire erasing of the lives and connections they have built and the belonging they experience:

> I have left everything behind. I still had many appointments. I studied for 7 months and did my internship. At the moment I can receive my diploma, they come and get me, it is not logical. We are humans, we breathe, we love, they have to understand this! Where can I go to and restart my whole live at my age? I had already built up my whole house, I gave everything a place, I had to abandon it all. (male, 19 years)

This relates to Klein and Williams's (2012, p. 743) description of the arrest and detention of migrants in the UK: "bewildering experiences that contradict their senses of selfhood, their notions of natural justice, and their expectations of how a just society should treat its members". Feelings of indignation thus prevailed: indignation about the way they were arrested (e.g. being asked to come to the police station under false pretences, spending 24 hours in a police cell), but also, the single fact that they were arrested and detained was labelled as pure injustice (Griffiths, 2012). Many participants stressed they never did anything wrong, just lived a normal life without causing trouble, thereby indicating that by avoiding crime they considered themselves less in an 'illegal' state (Chauvin & Garces-Mascarenas, 2012) – rendering it very hard for them to understand why they were arrested and detained whereas other migrants who committed crimes even received residence documents.

> I already live here for 8 years, and never did criminal things. I live normal, I don't touch anyone, I don't steal. People who indeed do such things, they get papers. I know a lot of criminals who get papers. If I tell people that I have no papers, they don't understand that is possible. (male, 32 years)

By emphasising they were not criminals and did not pose any threat, the migrants challenged particular public discourses in which undocumented migrants are linked with criminality and danger, thereby contesting the presumption that detention of migrants is needed to ensure state security.

10.3.2 No (re)turning back?

> I don't think about returning. Where to return to? How to return if I come from nowhere? I have no place to go to. (female, 39 years)

Because all interviewed migrants were detained with the purpose of effecting their forced removal from Belgian territory to their home country, we explicitly asked the participants to expand on their perspectives on the upcoming forced return to their country of origin. Although we did not expect any eagerness or

willingness to return amongst our participants (Kox, 2011), it was surprising that the vast majority did not even *think* about the return and stated that returning was simply impossible and out of the question, mostly because going back would end up in their imprisonment or death (murdered or because of lack of adequate medical treatment). Many interviewees stated very strongly that they would not return: "I certainly don't go back alive. I'll never go back to Georgia"; and "I don't return, not voluntarily and not forced! If they force me into a plane, I'll destroy everything and throw myself out of the window!" Moreover, participants contested that the migration authorities could consider them to be 'deportable': "Something small happens to me over there and I am dead", a Georgian man said. "How can they send me back?" Very few respondents indicated they were well aware of what was planned for them, although even for these few, talking about returning remained too challenging:

> I know they plan to send me back, but I don't want to think about it. God made me like this, that I can bear everything except going back there. It is very difficult for me to think that I need to reintegrate there again. I don't want to think about that, I don't want to talk about that. (male, 19 years)

Most participants, even independent of their time spent in Belgium, seemed to be denying or suppressing the idea that the chance existed that they would be deported. This is illustrated by the fact that all but two detainees gave their Belgian cell phone number to the researcher when she asked for it (in order to be able to contact participants again 2 months later), explaining that this was the number through which we could reach them. In our field notes, we also recorded this denial or avoidance of the idea of upcoming deportation:

> During the interview, Leyla firmly stated that no one ever talked with her about the deportation and that she had no idea what was going to happen with her. Impressed about this lack of information, I raised this matter with her social worker at the centre after the interview. The social worker was clear that Leyla had already been brought to the airport once, but refused her flight. She was assigned to a second flight within a few days and was informed about this. The social worker explained she found it very challenging to communicate with Leyla. For example, Leyla spoke French well when the social worker asked her about her Belgian fiancé, but from the moment the social worker addressed the upcoming deportation, Leyla seemed to have lost all ability to speak or understand French. No communication seemed then to be possible; the social worker even had the impression Leyla was just not listening. (field notes, August 2012)

> During the interview, Anahit was crying because all her clothes were in her apartment, but would be taken away by the landlord since she hadn't paid the rent this month. Noticing that this theme worried her a lot, I proposed to look for a solution to bring her clothes to the detention centre, but she responded: "But I need my clothes in my house! Why would you bring them all here?" (field notes, October 2012)

These quotes illustrate both this denial of the upcoming deportation and the extreme situation in which the detainees find themselves (having intense links with Belgium through a fiancé but almost repatriated) and the way migrants try to cope with their situation: as illustrated in the second quote, the living situations are split and social workers are placed in that part to which the interviewees do not want to belong (refusing to speak).

Returning was thus not considered a possibility, even when directly confronted with deportation. All the respondents thus lived in the hope of being released, although some expressed the wish to return eventually to their country of origin but only on condition that current problems (e.g. medical concerns) had been resolved. Two respondents, although still with deep reluctance and without any idea how to restart life back home after living for many years (7 and 13 years) in Belgium, were more or less resigned to the idea that they would be deported soon, which was also illustrated by the fact that they gave us an Armenian/Georgian phone number as contact information.

But whether or not the deportation was recognized as a realistic prospect, the interviews showed that almost all detainees considered returning 'home' as something completely unjust and unimaginable. Only two participants – whose entire families were living (legally) in Belgium and who had both already been detained before – indicated that they were aware they could be deported. Both stated that deportation was not really a problem: they were prepared to cooperate with the deportation and intended afterwards just to return to Belgium:

> "Of course I'll go, I have no other choice. But I have to return [to Belgium], no matter what. My son is here in Belgium! I cannot leave him here, or leave my mother, my father, my brothers here. I also have a heart, you know. Everyone in my family has papers. (male, 26 years)

10.3.3 Common thread: The feeling of belonging

> *Where are you from?*
>
> Me? From Brussels. (female, 39 years)

As shown in several quotes, the arrest, detention, and upcoming deportation were strongly opposed by the interviewees in referring to their ties with Belgium, thereby depicting Belgium - and no longer their country of origin – as their 'home'. Many interviewees raised a range of strong linkages with this new society, in doing so defending their belonging to this country. The notion of belonging, referring to the relationship between individual and place, is mostly depicted along two dimensions: the dimension of rights and obligations inherent in citizenship and the dimension of how subjects feel about their location in the social world (Yuval-Davis *et al*., 2005). The latter dimension strongly prevailed in the perspectives of the detainees, indicating that 'the feeling of belonging' goes much deeper than merely legal membership, because belonging relates to emotional attachment, to feeling 'at home' and 'feeling safe'. One element the interviewees used to legitimate their belonging was their social network, which was for most interviewees now located in Belgium, either because family members had also migrated here, or because they had built new and strong social ties (e.g. a fiancé): "I have my friends there, I am chez moi"; "My children are born here and I want them to have a good future". This shows that migrants with temporary or no residence documents also engage in social relations and interact with society as active agents, although they are largely affected by structural forces that try to reduce this bonding and belonging (Chavez, 1991; Coutin, 2000; De Genova, 2002). Quoting a respondent: "We are also human, we breathe, we live and we love." Although creating social ties does not automatically involve 'incorporation' into the receiving society (Chavez, 1991), our respondents stressed the existence of these ties and the impossibility of ignoring them.

Besides concrete social networks, respondents pointed to their 'being part of the community', because they had lived here for a long time, they were 'well known' ("Everybody knows me here"), and participated in different ways in society:

> "When I learned the language, it was not difficult for me anymore. I know a lot of people now, I am here already 4 years, that is a long time you know. (male, age unknown)

> "I went to school here and I worked for free. I helped other people, elderly people, I cooked for them and washed their clothes. (female, age unknown)

Several of these elements (social network, family, language and participation) made them feel at home in the new society, but also other elements created emotional ties. Some people noted they were emotionally bounded to a certain place ("my sister is buried here, I cannot leave her behind, I have all my memories

here") or places resembled 'home' through familiarity, adjustment and adaptation (Butcher, 2010):

> I am used to the life here now, that is why I want to stay. (female, 29 years)

Additionally, physically having a place to go to and a place to which you belong (material ties) is very important. As Conlon (2011) argues, even though asylum seekers (so definitely also undocumented migrants) have a limited number of possessions, these material objects support their embeddedness within specific physical and cultural geographies. For one respondent, having a place in Belgium (while lacking one in the country of origin) was the self-evident justification of his place in and belonging to Belgian society. He therefore expressed his astonishment about the fact that he was able to prove that he did not have a house or family in his country of origin but that this evidence was considered irrelevant by both the Belgian and Georgian authorities and his claim thus refuted:

> I asked them: where will you send me to in Georgia? You know well enough that I don't have a house there. I can prove it all to you; my mother died and I have no house or family there. If you don't believe me, please come with me to Georgia, only for two days. You are going to see, with your eyes! Not with my eyes. Just come and you will see where I will sleep. I have nothing there… But they don't care. They pretend to have human rights here, but it's all idle talk. […] I told the Georgian embassy as well that I have no house there, but they don't care either, and replied that I don't have anything here either, which is not true, I have an address here where I live together with my father. (male, 28 years)

Other respondents echoed this view and expressed their amazement that those connections did not matter at all in migration authorities' consideration of their case:

> I just want to be next to my family. The judge said he understood, and then they give me negative! For what? I really don't know. (male, 26 years).

Belonging is also expressed in participants' arguments that in Belgium, they had found things they never had or experienced before. For some, living in Belgium brought 'chances', chances to survive, chances to live:

> In Belgium, I had at least once an orange card.[5] This is the most I ever had! Never or nowhere else did I had some kind of papers, only here. (female, 39 years)

Others mentioned the peace they found in Belgium:

> I found peace here, the peace that you know that it can't happen anymore – they just kill you, just like that. (male, 39 years)

So, despite the fact that our respondents did not have the legal right to stay in Belgium, they still felt somehow protected by the Belgian state and its laws, felt part of Belgian society, and also of the particular social contract between the state and its citizens. In this perspective, detention and upcoming deportation seemed even more an extreme violation of both their feelings of 'belonging' and their connection with and trust in Belgian society:

> I came to Belgium because I thought I would find democracy here. I didn't find it. At first I thought I found it. They said I could be treated, I believed it all. For four years, life was good, we lived as humans. But then, in between two [medical] treatments, they suddenly abandon me, they take away my support and tell me: go back to your country! (male, 36 years)

The importance of these ties, of belonging somewhere and receiving 'chances' in a particular place, is ultimately worded through the bewildering experiences of detainees who said that now, they had no ties at all nor any feelings of acceptance by any community: "How much more rejection can I take?":

> In Georgia, people got executed; for me, it is the same situation here. Every time they call me to the commissariat,6 I have the feeling they will shoot me. I am condemned. Every moment feels as such to me. I really have been tortured, from one country to the other. I told you everything I have been going through, but I still need to be able to live with that. (male, age unknown)

Our interviews thus showed how migrants in detention struggle against legal categorization as 'non-citizens' by claiming their affective citizenship: they feel closely connected to the host community, not through legal ties or legal membership, but through their fundamental experiences of 'belonging' (Bosworth, 2012). Whereas other studies illustrate undocumented migrants' conflicting experiences and perceptions regarding feeling or not feeling part of the host country (Chavez, 1991), in the context of detention, previous experiences of

exclusion from the host society seem to fade and one's belonging to it is strongly emphasized. In contexts of exclusion and when people feel threatened and insecure, the emotional components of belonging are activated (Yuval-Davis, 2006), which explains the importance of this affective dimension of belonging for the detained migrants we interviewed. Through its discomfort of relocating into a new cultural context, migration often initiates challenging processes of redefining home and strong affective responses to 'the place of home' (Butcher, 2010). For detainees, 'replacing home', or even more strongly, 'defending home', is a necessity, a handhold in dealing with feelings of vulnerability, uncertainty, and dislocation (Butcher, 2010). This becomes even more intense, as shown in several quotes, in participants' emphasis on their single belonging to one particular place that offers them security and familiarity (Fullilove, 1996).

Having these strong feelings of belonging, it was extremely hard for the respondents to be confronted with policies' exclusionary boundary lines of belonging, in which their own belonging and ties are not recognized at all. Coutin (2000) refers to this as 'the nonexistence imposed by migrant illegality': what is 'real' is restricted to what can be 'proved' (i.e. documented), and migration policies nullify the legal legitimacy of certain kinship ties. The 'belonging' our interviewees referred to is thus differentiated from the so-called politics of belonging, those political projects that aim at marking boundaries between those who do and those who do not belong to a certain group (Yuval-Davis, 2006), such as current immigration policy, citizenship arrangements and return migration policy (De Bree, Davids, & De Haas, 2010). In their efforts to create a sense of being at home, the detainees therefore try to mediate between their own subjective perspective and the boundaries imposed on them by discourses and institutions (the politics of belonging) (Davids & van Driel, 2005).

10.4 Conclusion

In this paper, the lived experiences of migrants in detention centres were brought into the current debate on migrant detention. Given its focus, this paper does not include the perspectives of other actors, nor did we verify interviewees' statements. Moreover, the study sample does not allow generalization of the findings to all Georgian and Armenian migrants in Belgian detention centres, let alone to all detainees or across different nation states. Still, the study offers opportunities to portray a variety of stories and lived experiences, which contrast with the current unilateral approaches in official migration policies and discourses. Above all, despite the heterogeneity in the respondent group concerning background, migration motives and current living, and legal situation, we found extensive parallels in interviewees' views on detention and deportation.

Although we initially planned to focus on detained migrants' views on their return, the interviewees showed that the upcoming forced return was not what occupied their minds: they repeatedly expressed hope that justice would prevail and they would be released, which would enable them to pursue their dreams of building up and living 'just a normal life'. However, later attempts to contact our respondents group revealed that nine interviewees were effectively deported,[7] four were released,[8] and one couple consented to return with additional medical assistance. The remaining 16 respondents could not be reached (the Belgian mobile number they gave us did not work anymore), which means presumably that they were repatriated. Almost all interviewees were thus, most likely, effectively deported – for most, a totally unexpected event. This conclusion is deepened by the account of an interviewee who was detained several times (but never effectively deported) and who gave his view that deportation policies had become significantly stricter:

> "It is my tenth time in a closed centre. Each time, they just released me; three times, I escaped. In the past, you could not receive a travel document if they could not prove your identity, but now, they give a travel document to everyone! (male, 39 years)

The respondents' stories brought the experience of 'belonging' to the forefront of this paper. In a current global context in which people are simultaneously more forced and also more enabled to relocate and to move, subjective issues of belonging are increasingly becoming part of many people's everyday experiences (Bosworth, 2012). The detainees' narratives show that the bonds they created with society, despite their vulnerable position, did not disappear upon detention. To the contrary, the experience of detention enlarged their feeling of belonging, as an embodied response to the feelings of dislocation, contradiction, and injustice it induced and as a last measure for realising a 'sense of ontological security' (Chase, 2013; Giddens, 1991). Moreover, their feeling of belonging to one particular place shows that despite strong emphasis in contemporary transnationalism theories on the disconnection between people and places, and on the 'borderlessness', 'deterritorialization' or 'fluidity' of identity and belonging, the detainees' narratives kept on pointing to the centrality of the connection between 'body' and 'place' (O'Connor, 2010), in an attempt to compensate for their feelings of displacement by turning to new forms of 'place-based' identity (Butcher, 2010). In these precarious living situations and states of exclusion, with the particular identities imposed on them that constrain and constrict their lives (Silverman & Massa, 2012), there is only '*forced* transnationalism' (Zilberg, 2004) without a single opportunity to build social fields that transcend borders (Glick Schiller, Basch, & Blanc-Szanton., 1992) or to belong everywhere (Nowicka, 2007).

This reflects the large gap between on the one hand, detainees' lived experiences and living realities, in which – despite the political exclusion – they were somehow members of society, and developed familial, material and emotional ties, spaces for belonging, and emotional attachments and on the other hand, political discourses of (legal) (not) belonging (Bosniak, 2006; Swain, 2007) that largely reject and ignore migrants' lived experiences (Coutin, 2000). And this gap between detainees' and the state's conception of citizenship seems to be widening ever further, as shown, for example, in the fact that although previously ties with the host country could still prevent deportation, this is less the case nowadays.

Despite detainees' inability to change their situation, they tried to resist the labels and exclusion that were imposed on them and to assert their right to place and self-determination in the face of social and geographical exclusion (Darling, 2009). First, through their stories, the interviewees emphasized that legal citizenship was not connected to their sense of belonging, in an effort to remove the strict legal boundary between 'us' and 'them'. The migrants claimed citizenship of the host country on basis of their social and physical presence in this society and their ties with this socio-political space. The lived experiences of detainees thus give insight into the disjuncture between citizenship and belonging (Anderson *et al.*, 2011), the burden and consequences of lacking citizenship and, simultaneously, demonstrate how individuals try to assert alternative, identity-based claims (Bosworth, 2012; Davids & van Driel, 2005).

Secondly, we established that detainees tried to resist – or maybe tried to cope with – the detention, its ambivalences, and the exclusion processes by rejecting (or at least avoiding) the idea of deportation. Even in the context of a detention centre, with daily confrontations with acts of deportation, the detained migrants still denied their own deportability (Bosniak, 2006).

It is, however, quite unclear what the possible impact of these yawning discrepancies – large and increasing gaps between policy discourses and detainees' lived experiences and denial of (upcoming) deportation – is on the wellbeing of detained and deported migrants, because a sense of belonging and control over ones' environment are considered preconditions for obtaining a sense of wellbeing (Nussbaum, 2000). Moreover, research indicates that voluntary return impacts on migrants' wellbeing and that reintegration into the home country (Lietaert, Derluyn, & Broekaert, 2014) or an unprepared release back into the host society (Klein & Williams, 2012) often proceed in a difficult and complex manner. It is therefore likely that (unexpected and/or unprepared) detention and deportation may have severe negative consequences for migrants' wellbeing, as well as rendering their future lives (wherever located) highly challenging.

Notes

1. The detention centre that is not included in the study is a centre only meant for people arriving at the international border (airport) and either considered 'inadmissible' into the national territory or, having applied for asylum at the border, awaiting their decision in the detention centre. These migrants thus did not reside on Belgian territory before their detention, as is the case with the detainees in the other closed refugee centres.
2. We need to point here to the fact that the nationalities with a high rate of incarnation compared with the overall numbers (i.e. migrants from Armenia, the Balkan countries, and Guinea) are also those nationalities for which asylum requests receive priority treatment in Belgium (CGKR, 2012a).
3. Multiple answers were possible; three persons did not specify their migration reasons one person came to Belgium for business reasons without intending to migrate.
4. The researcher spoke with the son of this woman in another detention centre, who clarified that his mother told him about the visit of the researcher but refused participation as she thought the researcher was connected with the immigration board. The son stressed that his mother had misunderstood the question and he himself was prepared to participate.
5. An 'orange card' is issued to all those who made an asylum application, and the card is extended monthly for as long as the asylum procedure takes (Kruispunt Migratie- Integratie, 2013).
6. The interviewee here refers to the migration authority 'Office of the Commissioner-General for Refugees and Stateless Persons', where the asylum application is processed and where it is decided whether refugee status or subsidiary protection status can be granted.
7. Seven of the detainees who were deported could not be reached through their (Belgian) phone number, but their deportation was confirmed by family members or by a social assistant in the centre. Two participants could be reached in person by phone.
8. The persons who were released could be personally contacted by phone.

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11
General discussion

11.1 Introduction

The overall aim of this dissertation was to gain insight into the return processes and lived experiences of migrants who have a precarious residence status in the host country (Belgium), and return to their country of origin (Armenia or Georgia) within the framework of a governmental programme on voluntary return.

A preliminary case study on migrants' perspectives on their return with AVRR (assisted voluntary return and reintegration) support to Nepal (chapter 2) revealed that returnees' appraisal of their return process related to: (1) the living situation in the host country before the return and its influence on the voluntariness of the return decision; (2) the returnee's perspectives on the return while still in the host country; and (3) the actual living situation in the home country after return.

These findings and the review of the literature (see chapter 1) confirmed that the study of return and reintegration processes would benefit from a more in-depth understanding of migrants' experiences during different phases of the return process (both before and after return) (Black *et al*., 2004; Van Houte & Davids, 2008). We therefore adopted a multi-sited, longitudinal and contextualized research design that placed the narratives, perspectives and meaning-making processes of returnees in the centre of the research. As was outlined in the introduction of this dissertation, this implies that we view returnees as interpretative subjects, and we attempt to see return and reintegration processes from their points of view. Furthermore, we explored the perspectives of different actors (the host country's policy perspective, the perspectives of social workers, and the perspectives of returnees) on the Belgian AVRR programme and the actual implementation of the reintegration support. As such, our research intended to move beyond taken-for-granted or top-down representations on return migration and reintegration processes after return, and to shed a different light on these processes of return migration and reintegration.

In pursuit of this objective, we explored the evolutions in the Belgian policy on assisted voluntary return (AVR)[1] (chapter 3); migrants' return motives, their living conditions before their return and their experiences of voluntariness of the return (chapter 4); possible changes in returnees' post-return situations during the initial two years after return (chapter 5); the existence and impact of

[1] The term AVR is used as an umbrella term to refer to all kinds of return support in pre-return, during return and/or post-return phase. The term 'assisted voluntary return and reintegration' (AVRR) refers to support that also includes post-return reintegration assistance. All the assisted returnees in this research received AVRR support.

transnational ties on returnees' post-return situations (chapter 6); returnees' evaluation of their return experience and wellbeing throughout time (chapter 7); and returnees' (chapter 8) and social workers' (chapter 9) perspectives on reintegration support. A final study looked at the perspectives of migrants detained in detention centres on return migration (chapter 10) as a counter-case to the perspectives of migrants returning with AVRR support.

In this final chapter, we integrate the main findings of the different studies to address the overall research questions, and to clarify how the research contributes to current knowledge on return and reintegration processes of migrants with a precarious residence status in the host country and the practice of assisted voluntary return and reintegration support. After that, we outline the contribution of this research project to academic discussions on return migration and discuss the implications of this research for return migration policy and reintegration support practices. Finally, we reflect on the limitations of this research project, and we outline possible implications for further research.

11.2 Main findings

11.2.1 Longitudinal follow-up of the lived experiences of returnees

Our longitudinal follow-up of migrants returning with AVRR support enabled us to enlarge the insights into the post-return situations of returnees with a precarious residence status in the host country and their experiences of their return and reintegration processes. The evolutions and changes found in the respondents' post-return situations and in their evaluation of their return experiences stressed the dynamic character of return migration and reintegration processes, and confirmed that return is not only a stage within a possible ongoing migration cycle (Black *et al.*, 2004; King, 2000), though is an ongoing process in itself.

Throughout the various chapters, this research confirmed that the respondents' return was not an easy homecoming, and it illustrated the various challenges the respondents were confronted with to start up their lives after return. However, the patterns of reintegration and wellbeing varied, and the follow-up also revealed positive stories of increased wellbeing and improvement of living conditions (chapter 5 and 7). Central to many stories was the inherent ambiguity of the return experience: the post-return situation contained elements of both hardship and satisfaction. Therefore, following Markowitz and Stefansson (2004), we pleaded for seeing return more as a 'future-oriented social project', wherein returnees try to (re)construct a new sense of place and future plans, instead of focusing on an 'impossible homecoming'. Yet, the multiple factors that impacted the return experiences and their strong mutual interaction highlighted the

necessity to be cautious with generalizations about returnees (Ackermann, 2003; Gualda & Escriva, 2014; Zimmermann, 2012). In the following section, we show how our findings on returnees' realities and complex subjectivities can bring nuances to the understanding of concepts and themes that are important elements of migrants' return migration and reintegration processes, and how the findings shed light on the multiplicity of return experiences.

11.2.1.1 Voluntariness

Investigating the return decision-making processes, the living conditions in the host country and the lived experiences of migrants who return to their country of origin within the framework of an AVRR programme, chapter 4 showed that a range of factors influenced migrants' decision to return. Those factors only received their value when considered in light of the perspectives and experiences of the migrants themselves, what stressed the highly personal nature of the decision process. Nonetheless, the study highlighted the significant role of the host country's living conditions and migrants' legal status in returnees' decision processes. These factors often forced the respondents to choose to return, in an attempt to find a less painful alternative to a living situation of continued destitution or to the risk of forced repatriation. Moreover, factors such as familial expectations and health conditions also impacted returnees' decision processes, and were also often experienced as real 'forcing factors'. These findings add to the argument of previous studies in which the 'voluntariness' of 'voluntary return', and the distinction made in return policy between 'forced' and 'voluntary' return based on the use of physical force by the host country in the return processes of migrants is questioned (Blitz, Sales, & Marzano, 2005; Noll, 1999; Van Houte, 2014; Webber, 2011).

However, some participants stressed that they made the decision to return themselves, while mentioning at the same time that the host country's circumstances, in combination with other elements, forced them to this decision. Chapter 7 illustrated that labelling the return as 'a choice' can be a way to rationalize the return decision and to make sense of the return process (Cornish, Peltzer, & MacLachlan, 1999; Eastmond, 2007). It also showed that the return itself can be a strategy to enhance the own wellbeing and to regain some control over one's life (Stein & Cuny, 1994). Therefore, despite strong elements of force or without any 'desire' to return, the decision to return was sometimes considered a positive, 'voluntary' choice. Also in the view of one of the social workers who supported returnees in the country of origin, returnees' return decisions contained important elements of choice (chapter 9).

Although the experience of their return as a personal choice did not always lead to a positive view on the upcoming return migration, there was an openness to the

idea of returning amongst the migrants returning with AVRR support, which, in contrast, was totally absent in the narratives of migrations in detention (chapter 10). When setting up the study in detention centres, we intended to gain insight into the perspectives of migrants in detention upon their upcoming forced return to the country of origin. However, almost all interviewees did not want to speak about this return, expressing clearly that the upcoming repatriation was simply unimaginable. Even stronger, the interviewed detained migrants tried to resist – or maybe tried to cope with – the detention, its ambivalence and the related exclusion processes through denying (or at least avoiding) the idea of deportation. Even in the context of a detention centre, with daily confrontations with acts of deportation, the detained migrants still denied their own deportability (Bosniak, 2006), and there seemed to be no space to consider nor talk about a return to the country of origin.

Based on these findings, we concluded that, although framing the return as 'voluntary' largely diverged from the experiences of the migrants returning with an AVRR programme themselves, labelling these respondents' return processes as 'forced return' is problematic as well. We therefore proposed a new concept, the concept of 'constrained choice'. While almost all respondents experienced elements of force in their return decision, we found important differences in returnees' willingness to return and in how people themselves labelled their decision to return as a 'voluntary' or a 'forced' decision. Therefore, dichotomous thinking in terms of a forced-voluntary distinction, related to, amongst other elements, the use of physical force or returnees' legal status, does not reflect returnees' experiences and their nuanced views on the 'voluntary' and 'forced' character of their return. Elements of force and choice seem to closely interact in complex and varying ways in their realities of making the decision to return. Considering the return of all migrants with a precarious residence status in the host country as 'forced' ignores the importance and the meaning the notion of choice can have, although it is often a 'constrained choice' in a context of limited legal alternatives.

Several chapters (chapters 2, 4 and 7) indicated that when returnees had a clear view on their post-return living situation while still being in the host country, something which was often created or enabled by the reintegration support, this contributed to migrants' willingness to return. Moreover, as illustrated by the results of chapter 2 and 7, a higher willingness to return and a clear view on the living situation after return rendered the return process easier and positively influenced returnees' wellbeing in the first year after the return. However, the results of chapter 7 also showed that having a positive view on the return experience depended more on returnees' post-return living situation and wellbeing, than on the initial degree of willingness to return. This nuanced the

impact of migrants willingness to return and added to the argument that more willingness to return will not automatically simplify migrants' return and reintegration process, and again, urges to avoid the false dichotomy between forced and voluntary return (Turton, 2003; Van Hear, Brubaker, & Bessa, 2009; Vathi & Duci, 2016).

11.2.1.2 Material living situations after return

In line with other research (Black *et al*., 2004; Pedersen, 2003; Ruben, Van Houte, & Davids, 2009), our research (in particular chapters 5, 7, 8 and 9) highlighted that establishing a material base for living, in particular gaining an income (that is sufficient to maintain one's family) and having access to housing (a stable and suitable living place), was an extremely important and determining issue in migrants' evaluations of their post-return situations. In chapter 5 and 8, we showed how several respondents managed to earn an income, often through combining their income-generating activity started up with the reintegration support with other temporary or informal jobs.

With regards to these income-generating activities, we want to highlight two important elements. First, the realization of a small-scale income-generating activity, as fast as possible after their arrival in the country of origin, was extremely important for the respondents, since it offered them a means to earn an income and to maintain their family (Sinatti, 2015). Yet, consistent with the distinction made by Sinatti (2015) between different types of 'business outcomes' of returnees' activities, the income-generating activities the respondents developed were 'survivalist businesses', set up with little capital and aiming at providing income for the family. Any kind of 'growth-oriented business', which could also be linked to the 'development goals' (return migration as a way to develop a particular country) as set out by those policies that try to link return migration with the development of the countries of origin (Åkesson & Baaz, 2015; Sinatti & Horst, 2015; Van Houte, 2014), requires forms of capital and resources (e.g., specialized knowledge, finances, and transnational and local social networks) that our respondents clearly did not possess. As shown in different chapters, the respondents returned with few resources and little capital, due to their migration trajectory as rejected asylum seekers or undocumented migrants which did not allow them to work and made them living in segregated refugee centres (Åkesson & Baaz, 2015; Golash-Boza, 2014; Van Houte & Davids, 2008). Further, while researchers have argued that the access to transnational field enables returnees' making of a material home (Åkesson & Baaz, 2015; Pedersen, 2003), all our respondents had very little possibilities to create connections while being in the host country and maintain transnational ties after return. As illustrated in chapter 6, restrictions in establishing the transnational ties between the returned migrant

and in the host country were due to the already mentioned structural barriers in the host country, in particular the barriers related to the returnees' previous status as asylum applicant, the circumstances of their return (relatively quick and sometimes unprepared departure from the host country), their constrained financial resources after return, and the host country's migration policy which forbad the returnees to return to the host country for a period of five years. This made that the respondents could not engage in back and forwards movements between the country of origin and the host country, which is an important condition to maintain interpersonal transnational ties (Baldassar, 2008; Urry, 2002), and which could have been a way to gain important resources to facilitate their reintegration process (Golash-Boza, 2014; Van Houte, 2014). Our findings thus illustrated how restrictive immigration policies create an 'immobility regime', in which barriers, restrictions and inequalities in realizing human mobility determine people's opportunities (Carling, 2008; Levitt, De Wind, & Vertovec, 2003; Turner, 2007), and as such, created boundaries to returnees' transnationalism. In many cases, the limited reintegration support was the only tangible, and often also intangible, resource for the migrant to take back home.

Second, chapter 5 and 8 confirmed the precariousness of the economic activities that the returnees started with the (small) reintegration budgets (Cassarino, 2014; Ruben *et al*., 2009). Although most respondents did *start* an income-generating activity, the earnings of these activities were often only sufficient for daily survival. Several respondents managed to cope with certain difficulties, such as unexpected costs, through combining various economic activities, relying on their social network or engaging in temporary labour migration. Nonetheless, the results also showed that some respondents had to end their 'business' when confronted with misfortune or reverse (e.g., rising prices, hail storm, disease among the cattle), what clearly showed that these activities cannot be considered as 'sustainable livelihoods' (Van Houte & Davids, 2008). The precariousness of their investments was reinforced by the unstable economic and political situation in the country of origin (e.g., low buying power, unstable prices, inaccessible and unaffordable health care, importance of political connections, climate of corruptions and strong barriers for small scale business) (Bakhshinyan, 2014; ETF, 2013; Falkingham, 2005; Karklins, 2002). In line with this, a social worker supporting returnees in their reintegration processes (chapter 9) argued that, due to the limited reintegration budget and the generally difficult living contexts in the country of origin, even returnees with a realistic plan and who spent the budget well, had no guarantee on a successful reintegration and needed to have "some luck from different sides" in order to maintain their income-generating activity.

11.2.1.3 Multidimensionality of post-return situations and return experiences

In contrast with the importance put on material living conditions, the focus of chapter 5 on what returnees themselves identified as the crucial factors that impact their post-return situations clearly illustrated that returnees' material situation did not relate directly to their overall appraisal of their situation (Bartram, 2013). Returnees mentioned various important dimensions of their post-return situations (i.e., the context of the country of origin; their social network; feelings of belonging; personal health; people's mood and feelings of agency; the migration experience; and the received reintegration support). These dimensions were comparable to previous studies on post-return situations (Black *et al*., 2004; Ruben *et al*., 2009), and the returnees' stories clearly illustrated that these dimensions were interrelated and strongly reinforced each other (Ruben *et al*., 2009). However, our focus on the dynamic interplay between, and evolution in, different domains revealed that returnees often experienced contradictions between different themes (e.g., being confronted with poor material situation yet still experiencing a strong feeling of belonging to the country of origin). This finding illustrated again the inherent ambiguity of return experiences (see 11.2.1), yet the study also highlighted the diversity in value and importance the returnees attached to the different themes and life domains. Although this is widely recognized in the fields of, amongst others, wellbeing and quality of life (Cummins, 1996; Diener & Suh, 1997; Inoguchi & Shin, 2009), the concepts of 'domain importance' or 'value priority' (Hsieh, 2003) are seldom been taken in account in the domain of return migration. Yet, the attribution of different meanings to similar situations, in which one theme can negatively or positively outweigh or compensate for other themes (Best, Cummins, & Lo, 2000), might help in our understanding of the complexity and unpredictability of post-return evaluations. Therefore, we should not only consider the 'outcomes' of return processes or their sustainability compared with a particular norm, but foremost the meanings returnees themselves attribute to their situation (Wright, 2011).

Interestingly, in contrast to previous research, respondents in our study did not mention the impact of the socio-cultural shame which is sometimes related to a failed migration trajectory, nor the possible impact of the fact that the migration sometimes did not meet family or community expectations, or any other possible experiences of social distance between returnees and non-migrants (Markowitz & Stefansson, 2004; Riiskjaer & Nielsson, 2008; Schuster & Majidi, 2013; Van Meeteren *et al*., 2014). One hypothesis here for the absence of these aspects in returnees' narratives relates to a certain 'normality' of migration in these countries (Ishkanian, 2002) or to the established 'culture of migration' (Massey *et al*., 1993), leading to this 'normalization' of return migration. Another possible hypothesis, an aspect also pointed at by the returnees and the social workers, is

the strength of social networks in both countries, in particular the strength of the ties built up during someone's childhood (e.g., ties with neighbours or school friends), onto which both emigration and return seemed to have little impact. This can be related to the finding in the interviewed social workers' narratives that the returnees they supported were seldom in need of support to re-enter their social networks (Dimitrijevic, Todorovic, & Grkovic, 2004).

In addition, the returnees' stories showed that having perspectives and a feeling of agency strongly influenced their evaluation of the dynamics of their post-return situations: evolutions in post-return situations often ran parallel with changes in returnees' abilities to take action and to create change (Abbott, Wallace, & Sapsford, 2011; Fozdar & Torezani, 2008). Next, returnees' feelings of security and safety were an important prerequisite for their subjective wellbeing (Cárdenas, Mejıá, & Di Maro, 2010; Cummins, 1996). However, seen from the perspectives of the returnees, their concept of safety extended far beyond the conventional understanding of physical protection from harm (Zimmermann, 2012), and referred to the concept of 'ontological security' (Giddens, 1991), entailing physical, material and juridical elements, as well as the need for stability and predictability of life, and the opportunity "to carve out a life plan and envisaging a trajectory into the future" (Chase, 2012, p. 860). Moreover, chapter 6 also illustrated that the transnational ties our respondents had with people in the host country contributed to their sense of happiness after return, enhanced their feelings of belonging to the country of origin (De Bree, Davids, & De Haas, 2010; Van Meeteren *et al*., 2014), and confirmed the importance of these ties throughout the return experience (Pedersen, 2003).

Finally, Chapter 7 showed how returnees' everyday life situations and the meanings that returnees themselves attributed to their situation strongly affected how returnees experienced their return: the returnees changed their explanations regarding their migration and their return in relation to changes in their life situations (Pedersen, 2003). This renegotiation of return experiences in light of post-return living situations and previous migration experiences showed how migrants' views on their return experiences can be seen as a 'performative act' (Butler, 1993), through which decisions, belonging, and meanings of places and experiences can be renegotiated and relocated into personal biographies (King & Christou, 2010), in order to rationalize and cope with apparent contradictions and to make sense of the return (Cornish *et al*., 1999; Eastmond, 2007).

11.2.1.4 The wish to re-emigrate? Feelings of belonging

Finally, returnees' wish to re-emigrate is often regarded as a strong indicator for their lack of reintegration in the country of origin (Black *et al*., 2004; Koser & Kuschminder, 2015; Van Houte & De Koning, 2008). Chapter 6 illustrated how

almost all respondents extensively talked about their wish to return to Belgium. However, while some migrants indeed wished to leave their country of origin, but did not have the means for doing so (Van Houte & De Koning, 2008), our data also shed a different light on this 'wish to re-emigrate'. This idea of returning to Belgium was for many respondents an illustration of their longing to stay connected with Belgium (Baldassar, 2008; Urry, 2002), and to retain connections with the place and community they once felt part of, and from which they were now separated because of their return (Butcher, 2010; Coutin, 2000; Drotbohm, 2011; Pedersen, 2003; Weiß, 2005) – rather than a wish to return and resettle in the host country. The strong wish to maintain connected with Belgian often co-existed with strong feelings of belonging to the country of origin. Furthermore, the idea of remigrating to Belgium functioned as a hypothetical back-up plan, as a moral resource for dealing with the difficulties and injustices they were confronted with in their country of origin. This symbolic connection with Belgium, this 'myth of remigration', strongly resembled what is described in the literature about immigrants in host countries as 'the orientation towards the home country' and 'the myth of return', the image of returning to the home country, some day, that immigrants hold onto as a strategy for coping with their living abroad, yet often without ever achieving this return (Anwar, 1979; Zetter, 1999). The results highlighted that these ties with Belgium had a large emotional impact on the returnees, showing that the subjective and symbolic dimensions of transnationalism mattered and should not be overlooked (Baldassar, 2008; Levitt *et al.*, 2003), even if they do not have a tangible influence.

In this way, chapter 5 also illustrated that returnees' experiences of transnational belonging functioned as meaningful symbolic capital, as 'proof' of their migration experiences, and as a moral resource to cope with difficulties in the post-return situation. The transnational symbolic ties with Belgium that the returnees experienced were important for their return experiences, daily lives and wellbeing. Equally, chapter 10 illustrated the centrality of feelings of belonging in the experiences of the migrants in detention centres. The detainees' narratives showed that the bonds they created with the Belgian society, despite their vulnerable position (mainly as undocumented migrant), did not disappear with the detention. Even on the contrary, the experience of detention intensified these feelings of belonging, as an embodied response to the feelings of dislocation, contradiction, and injustice the detention created, and as a last resource to realize a certain sense of ontological security (Chase, 2013; Giddens, 1991). Moreover, their feelings of belonging to one particular place (Belgium) showed that, despite the strong emphasis in contemporary transnationalism theories on the disconnection between 'people' and 'places', the detainees' narratives kept on pointing to the centrality of the connection between 'body' and 'place' (O'Connor,

2010), in an attempt to compensate for their feelings of displacement by turning to new forms of 'place-based' identity (Butcher, 2010).

Therefore, both chapters illustrated, firstly, that legal citizenship was not connected to migrants' sense of belonging (Anderson, Gibney, & Paoletti, 2011; Erdal & Oeppen, 2013; Van Houte, 2014), and, secondly, the large disjuncture between migrants' lived experiences of belonging and the political discourses of (legal) (not) belonging (Bosniak, 2006; Swain, 2007). Third, these findings pointed to the burdens and consequences of particular structural constraints, such as the absence of (legal) citizenship or of the right to mobility, which both overlooked migrants' sense of belonging, and thus also negatively impacted their possibilities to obtain a sense of wellbeing (Nussbaum, 2000).

11.2.2 Perspectives on reintegration support

11.2.2.1 (Dis)connections between the policy discourse on return migration and returnees' realities and perspectives

The above mentioned findings showed a contradiction between the post-return realities and meaning-making processes of migrants who have returned with AVRR support, and the objectives of reintegration policies to facilitate returnees' sustainable reintegration in the country of origin (Van Houte & Davids, 2008). It revealed that the aim of contributing to returnees' sustainable reintegration was set without directing attention to the structural factors that shaped their possibilities to reintegration in their country of origin (Åkesson & Baaz, 2015). In doing so, current policy discourse ignores the complexity of return processes, and the realities and needs of returnees, and hence, the policy discourse creates unrealistic expectations of what can be done with the limited and short-term reintegration support (Åkesson & Baaz, 2015; Cassarino, 2008; Van Houte, 2014). Moreover, the sole focus on reintegration support as a means to facilitate sustainable reintegration, without targeting the broader contexts in which the support has to be implemented, leads to a strong individualizing approach to the complex social issue of reintegration. Such individualized approach, which fits with neoliberal approaches to welfare support, places the responsibility for one's wellbeing on the individual (Giddens, 1998; Roche, 1992; Rose, 2006; Vandenbroeck, Roose, & De Bie, 2011). Furthermore, it creates the view that failures to reintegrate 'successfully' are the individual responsibility of the returnee who did not take the given opportunities (Clarke, 2005; Schiettecat, 2016), and, according to Sinatti (2015), such reasoning alleviates state's responsibility for addressing structural barriers.

Nonetheless, several chapters also showed that the provided reintegration support had an important value for the returnees. The research results

highlighted the importance of the reintegration support during the return process, both before leaving the host country, as after being back in the country of origin. More specifically, the returnees indicated that the guidance given before the return helped them to reflect upon their readiness and willingness to return, and gave them a clearer orientation about what to do immediately after return. The financial support after return was described as a 'push in the right direction', and also had a positive impact on people's self-esteem and emotional wellbeing. It gave the returnees some opportunities and perspectives for change, and was experienced as an element of direction and security within the ambivalence of the return process. Furthermore, the social guidance was experienced as a very supportive element in this process of return and reintegration. Hence, this showed how various elements of the AVRR support had helped several returnees to bridge the – sometimes difficult – first period immediately after the return and also positively influenced their wellbeing once returned.

Therefore, this research brings a more nuanced view on the possibilities and added value of reintegration support, than the celebratory spin created in the policy discourse on AVRR and the available academic on the outcome of this support (see chapter 1).

11.2.2.2 Awkward engagements

The research also revealed the divergence between the perspectives of different actors (i.e., the perspective of the host country as derived from the set-up and the content of reintegration support in the AVRR programme, the perspectives of social workers in the country of origin who implement the reintegration support, and the migrants who return within the framework of this programme) on the possibilities that could be created by reintegration support and the way it is, or should be, interpreted and implemented. Following Åkesson (2011) and Tsing (2005), we argue that reintegration support can be considered as a 'zone of awkward engagement'. "Awkward engagements take place in zones where words mean something different across a divide […]. These zone […] arise out of encounters and interactions" (Åkesson, 2011, p.1). All three actors acknowledged the benefit of reintegration support, however, their interests and motivations for doing so were different, and consequently, the perspectives on the way the support should be implemented diverged. For most returnees, the support was needed to create an income, to find a way to create a future. From the perspective of the social workers, the support was needed to facilitate the reintegration process of returnees in need. And from the host country's perspective, providing reintegration support aimed at combining two goals: first, the support should enable migrants' return and facilitate their reintegration processes, and, second, the support is an instrument to control migration, aiming at returning those

migrants who are not (longer) allowed to stay and prevent their re-emigration to the host country.

Below, we summarized four central 'awkward engagements' between the different actors who are engaged in reintegration support.

First, from the host country's point of view, the reintegration budget should be used for sustainable investments that support returnees' socio-economic reintegration. However, the perspectives of social workers and returnees revealed, first, that it was not always possible to make a 'sustainable investment'. Due to the short time frame of the project, the available reintegration budget, limited resources of the returnee and the structural constraints, returnees argued they made the 'only feasible investment', or from the social workers' perspective 'the best possible investment'. Hence, this was not always sufficient for the returnee to create a sustainable income-generating activity. Second, the perspectives of the returnees showed how also other purchases that could not directly be linked to their sustainable economic reintegration (e.g., renovations of their house, payment of gas or electricity, a visit to the dentist visit, products of personal hygiene) were very important to enhance their wellbeing and quality of live.

Second, and closely connected to the previous point, chapter 10 showed how social workers evaluated 'reaching the best possible investment in a shared decision-making process with the returnee' as good reintegration support, while some returnees who did not manage to create an income with the support, considered the same support as 'insufficient'. This shows how nuances between both perspectives, focusing on the process or the outcome of the reintegration support, can lead to differences in how social workers and returnees evaluate the support.

Third, consistent with the finding of Van Houte and Davids (2008), both social workers and returnees' stressed the importance of social guidance in the reintegration process, next to the vital financial support. From the perspectives of the returnees, the presence and availability of a person one could turn to during the return process was experienced as very supportive. Furthermore, this social guidance created possibilities for the returnees to (re)negotiate and deliberate the implementation of the reintegration support. This renegotiation enabled returnees, at first, to adapt their plans to the particular context of the country of origin, which could only be realistically assessed once returned. Secondly, it created the possibility to acknowledge returnees' needs and their interpretations of what they considered important for their wellbeing (Bouverne-De Bie *et al*., 2014; Schiettecat, 2016). Yet, in the set-up and evaluation of the programme, the

host country mainly focused on the financial support, since this type of support is the most measurable and the easiest to control (Van Houte & Davids, 2008).

Fourth, there were different perspectives on when reintegration support should be allocated to the returnees. As from the host country's perspective, the reintegration support is considered an extra incentive for migrants to return to their country of origin, therefore, the amount of support was already allocated to returnees before their return. Also for those returnees for whom the availability of support determined their decision whether to return or not, the granting of a specific amount before their departure was crucial. Furthermore, the allocation of a concrete amount allowed the returnees to envision their possibilities after return. In contrast with this, social workers argued that this way of working did not allow to tailor the amount of support to the needs of each individual returning migrant, since a thorough needs assessment can in fact only be executed after return. Moreover, due to the 'business-oriented' focus and the introduction of time- and procedure-dependent eligibility criteria of the AVRR programme (chapter 3), as a means for the host country to 'stimulate' more migrants to return voluntarily and to return faster, the social workers argued that the support was not always allocated to people who are 'in need for support'.

We argued that these contradictions in the perspectives of the several actors involved are induced by the diverging interests different actors have related to the reintegration support. We here add that the awkward engagement and tension between these actors will likely grow, give the growing dominance of host country's migration control agenda, suggesting a changed objective for reintegration support, from social instrument to migration management tool (chapter 3).

11.3 Contributions of the research to the field of return migration

The aim of this research was to contribute to the empirical base of the study of return migration. We believe that our specific focus on returnees' lived experiences and their subjective accounts, and the inclusion of the particular group of returnees with a precarious residence status in the host country added important nuances to the discussions on return migration. This research also identified vital elements that are relevant to particular, situated conceptualizations of certain notions, including 'return experiences', 'post-return wellbeing', 'voluntariness', 'transnationalism', 'belonging' and 'reintegration support'. In what follows, we outline some specific contributions of our research to the field of return migration.

First, this research adopted a unique methodological approach to the study of return processes, through realizing the first multi-sited and longitudinal follow-up of migrants who return while having in a precarious residence status in the host country. Through interviewing the returnees at different stages of their return process, before their departure from the host country, within the first year after return to the country of origin and within the second year after return, we have provided valuable insights into the complexity and the dynamic changes of these returnees' post-return situations, their wellbeing and their evaluations of the return experience and return support.

Second, our central focus on returnees' subjective accounts and lived experiences revealed the multi-dimensional character of migrants' evaluations of their return experiences and the importance of elements beyond the material living conditions herein (Black *et al*., 2004; Ruben *et al*., 2009, Van Houte & Davids, 2008). The results clearly illustrated the dynamic interplay between the various themes and life domains that returnees considered important in their evaluations. Yet, the findings also showed the inherent ambiguity of return experiences (Markowitz & Stefansson, 2004), the contrasts returnees might experience in and between different domains, and the large impact of the subjective value they attributed to what they had won or lost because of their emigration and their return. These aspects further our understanding of the complexity and unpredictability of post-return evaluations. Furthermore, the study importantly highlighted how migrants' evaluations of their return process change over time, how return experiences are renegotiated and relocated into personal biographies (King & Christou, 2010), sometimes in an attempt to rationalize and cope with their ambiguous experiences throughout the return migration process (Cornish *et al*., 1999).

Third, through studying the perspectives of various actors on assisted voluntary return, this research revealed that different views arise due to the diverging interests all actors put in the AVRR support. Therefore, these perspectives of all different actors need to be considered when studying the practices of AVRR support, since a sole focus on the policy perspective, on the perspective of practitioners or on the perspectives of the programme's beneficiaries will only reveal a partial picture of the implementation of AVRR support and the possible outcomes of the programme. Moreover, this multiple approach enables to shed light on how various perspectives interact and influence each other, when several actors engage in the same field (Åkesson, 2011).

Fourth, this research confirmed the large impact of migrants' voluntariness in the return decision process (Black *et al*., 2004; Blitz *et al*., 2005), however, also stressed the relevance to experience the return (decision) (also) as a choice. Therefore, we argued that the continuum from 'voluntary return' to 'forced return'

should be considered more as a multi-layered continuum in which both elements of force and choice closely interact in complex and varying ways.

Next, the research showed the centrality of migrants' sense of belonging throughout their experiences. It illustrated the value of experiencing transnational belonging for the returnees, and the feelings of belonging to the host country for the migrants in detention. This highlighted the disconnection between legal citizenship and migrants' experiences of belonging, the large disjuncture between migrants' lived experiences and political discourses of belonging, and the burden and consequences of particular structural constraints, such as the denial of legal citizenship to certain groups or the prohibition of the right to mobility (Anderson *et al*., 2011; Bosniak, 2006; Coutin, 2000; Swain, 2007; Van Houte, 2014). Second, since structural constraints in the living situations of the respondents excluded them from being mobile or from residing in their preferred place of living, a reality which is also the case for other groups of migrants who do not have access to freedom of movement (De Giorgi, 2010; Kalm, 2010; Munck, 2008; Van Houte, 2014), the concepts of 'borderlessness', 'transnationalism', 'deterritorialization' or 'fluidity of identity', concepts that are often emphasized in current discourse on migration, have little place in the lives of these migrants. Consequently, we need to explore the particular, situated meanings of these concepts as they are shaped and evolve in the lives and meaning-making processes of these particular groups of migrants.

Related hereto, our research shed a different light on the nexus between return migration and transnationalism, by showing how returnees' access to the transnational social field can be strongly determined by their migration trajectory, and thus illustrated that the access is transnationalism is highly selective, situational and stratified (Boccagni, 2012; Smith, 2005). We therefore argued that transnationalism is not something that is automatically created in the field of return migration, and return migration is also not a sufficient condition to create transnationalism. We even argued that the importance of transnational symbolic ties in the return experiences and in returnees' daily lives, the consequences of the established gaps between returnees' desires and their ability to access the transnational social field, and the necessity to consider different contexts when studying the impact of transnationalism all call for a broader and multi-layered view on transnationalism, in research, policy and in practice.

Further, the insights of our research in returnees' post-return realities and their experiences of the large gap between their desire and the ability to maintain transnational ties which could support their reintegration process, join earlier research that question the link between return migration, transnationalism and development (Åkesson & Baaz, 2015; Sinatti & Horst, 2015; Van Houte, 2014). The research showed that the respondents did not acquire tangible capital or

resources during their migration trajectory. This largely questions the link between 'return' and the 'development' of the country to which (supported) migrants return as set in many policy and also research discourses. Moreover, any aspirations that the return of these migrants would contribute to the development of their country of origin, or ideas in which their return is linked to broader development goals were totally absent in the stories and perspectives of the respondents (Sinatti & Horst, 2015).

Finally, this research included a unique insight into returnees' perspectives on AVRR support, and articulated the elements they considered as supportive in their return and reintegration process. In addition, it provided the first insights in the perspectives of social workers in the country of origin who implement the AVR programmes of a West-European host country, and showed the importance of their perspectives in enlarging our understanding of the practices of reintegration support.

11.4 Implications for voluntary return policy and the practice of reintegration support

Our findings on the post-return lived realities of migrants returning with AVRR support and the perspectives of different actors on the content and implementation of reintegration support have several implications for AVRR policies and for practitioners supporting returnees. Based on the established contradiction between migrants' post-return realities and one of the AVRR programme's objectives to facilitate returnees' reintegration in the country of origin, we conclude that AVRR policy in general needs to be more modest and realistic about what may be achieved by the practice of reintegration support (Van Houte, 2014). Yet, the results also showed that reintegration support has the possibility to facilitate migrants' return processes, to enhance returnees' wellbeing, and to reduce their (in particular economic) vulnerability during the first years after return. It stands clear that various problems that are related to the respondents' reintegration processes are too big to 'solve' with the provision of financial and social support through an AVRR programme (Lorenz, 2014). However, if governments are sincere in their intention to support the reintegration processes of migrants returning while having a precarious residence status in the host country, and to provide a dignified and humane alternative for these migrants, various elements that could be improved need to be considered.

11.4.1 Supporting the return and reintegration of migrants who have only limited resources

Since the AVRR programme explicitly targets migrants who have a precarious residence status in the host country, return policy should acknowledge that these migrants, due to their particular migration trajectory, very often return with scarce resources. For many respondents in this study, the attributed reintegration support was the only tangible resource they returned with; consequently, the amount of reintegration support largely determined these returnees' further possibilities after return. Therefore, we want to discuss two important implications here: first, the reintegration support should be sufficient enough to support returnees' reintegration processes, and, second, policies in the host countries need to focus on enlarging these migrants' accesses to resources and opportunities.

This research showed that most Armenian and Georgian respondents were able to start an income-generating activity with the AVRR support. On the one hand, this differed from the results on the Nepali returnees in the preliminary case study, who were less able to start up an income-generating activity and were more negative about the support. Although we cannot determine to what extent the different return context played a role herein, this still seems to indicate that the increased budget and guidance the Armenian and Georgian returnees received to start up a 'business' (compared with the Nepali returnees who returned earlier and for whom this 'enhanced reintegration support' was not available yet) importantly enlarged returnees' possibilities and led to more positive evaluations of the added value of the reintegration support. On the other hand, it should be recognized that, especially for returnees who did not have any personal resource to add to the reintegration support (e.g., money, assets that can be used for the business, previous work experience, a partner with who they could collaborate), the small investment made with the reintegration budget created a very small and precarious income-generating activity, from which the income was sometimes too small for daily survival and too small to sustain the business. This showed that for these returnees, the amount of the support was too limited to facilitate their economic reintegration and encourage sustainable investments. Therefore, and in line with returnees' perspectives, this calls for creating possibilities for returnees to apply for additional support after the initial start-up phase of the income-generating activity. We argue that such additional support could enable returnees to make their activity more solid, and, consequently, decrease the impact of the factor 'luck' that seemed to be necessary for the returnees in these countries of origin to succeed. Furthermore, the possibility to apply for additional support after the start-up phase aligns with the perspectives of the different actors on the support that should be allocated to returnees. A standard amount of support to

start an income-generating activity could be allocated to the returnees before the departure. This support will provide the additional incentive the host country wants to create, and gives the returnee some certainty about the minimum amount of support that he/she will receive. The provision of additional support to certain returnees after the start-up phase joins the social workers' perspectives to support those returnees in need for support. Finally, providing this additional support through a low interest loan system would be a way to enlarge returnees' responsibility towards their own reintegration project, which is important according to the social workers. Moreover, this would remove particular structural barriers for the respondents, who do not have access to loans in the country origin – although, for sure, it would even be better if these structural barriers could be eliminated entirely (see 11.4.2).

Following other studies, our results also depicted how the host country's restrictive migration and integration policies undermined migrants' possibilities to acquire resources and skills during their stay in the host country (Åkesson & Baaz, 2015; Black *et al*., 2004; Koser & Kuschminder, 2015; Van Houte & Davids, 2008), and, consequently undermined their ability to reintegrate after return. As Van Houte & Davids (2008) have indicated, we argue that these findings urge to enable migrants to live as much as possible an independent living during their stay in the host country. Although the respondents who applied for asylum could work in Belgium after a waiting period of six months (Kruispunt Migratie-Integratie, 2016), almost none of the respondents were actually able the find a job. This shows that providing the permission to work is not sufficient enough to also find a job, and that other barriers (e.g., language skills, discrimination) need to be addressed (Åkesson & Baaz, 2015).

Further, the research showed that also returnees' relatively quick and sometimes unprepared departure from the host country and the states' migration policies that forbid them to return to the host country for a period of five years, restricted returnees' ability to create and maintain transnational ties, which could support their reintegration process (Cassarino, 2004; Pedersen, 2003). As such, a paradox is created between the goals of the voluntary return policy to support sustainable returns and the concrete AVRR programme's design which does not always allow migrants to prepare extensively for their return or to gather important resources to take with when returning.

Accordingly, we argue that the AVRR programme should not only encourage returnees to make sustainable investments in their living situation after return, yet also needs to create the conditions that enable returnees to make such investments. In the host country, returnees need sufficient time and decent living conditions in order to be able to prepare their return. However, when such a preparation before return is impossible or undesirable for the returnee, also in the

country of origin, the conditions to enable sustainable investments could be improved. For example, we could create a period in which the reintegration support can be used for daily survival (something that is normally not allowed), what could create the possibility for returnees to prepare better and think-through their investments, if needed.

Second, the research also showed that the quickness of the departure out of Belgium and the inability to return to Belgium afterwards to visits friends and family limited returnees' possibilities to maintain interpersonal ties with people in Belgium, which had a negative impact on their wellbeing. The research also highlighted the large emotional value of returnees' continued connections with their past lives in Belgium. Therefore, we argue that the programme should not only pay attention to the preparation process, yet the AVRR practices should try to enhance greater continuity in people's lives, paying attention to elements such as the returnee's farewell process and some material objects people can take with them. Furthermore, we need to think about removing the mobility prohibition for returnees who returned with the AVRR programme.

11.4.2 Attention for structural conditions in countries of origin

The result showed how the programme design of non-recurring, short-time and individualized support disregarded the structural conditions returnees were faced with in their country of origin. We therefore argue, in line with Cassarino (2014), that return policies should focus on enhancing returnees' access to opportunities, not only during their stay in the host county (see 11.4.1), yet also in their country of origin (Cassarino, 2014). We argue that a combined approach of both individual support to returnees and efforts to improve returnees' access to an wideness of opportunities is needed. The data showed that returnees do need individual support, as the received support is often a meaningful factor in creating opportunities and can improve returnees' wellbeing. Yet, on a broader level, AVR policies should reflect on whether their return policy needs to be followed by particular striven towards policies in the countries of origin, in order to tackle important barriers for returnees, and, consequently, also for non-migrants in the country of origin. For the countries of origin in this research, Armenia and Georgia, we could think on ways to improve the access to the health care or to remove the climate of corruption and clientelism. Yet, at any time, we need to reflect on how these policies also may reflect a certain 'neo-colonialism' towards these countries of origin, in line with the ways return migration is often link to 'development' (Sinatti & Horst, 2015).

11.4.3 The target group of AVR programmes

The large differences we found in the perspectives on returning to the country of origin between migrants returning with AVRR support and migrants in detention centres (who will be forcibly repatriated) illustrated that when a returnee experiences having a certain 'choice', even if it was a constrained choice, this is a highly important aspect to enhance migrants' wellbeing. The results also showed the high relevance of preparing for one's return, both mentally and practically, which can be stimulated by an AVRR programme, yet which was totally hindered and absent in the practice of migrants' forcible arrest, detention and repatriation. The results also revealed that AVRR programmes might play an important role in increasing the choices of migrants living in a precarious residence situation, through offering them dignified and adequate support. All these elements thus show that when people are offered the opportunity to 'choose' to return, even if this is in a very difficult and constrained living situation, this has high beneficial effects for their further living and lived experiences, even long after their return. However, this is in strong contrast with the time-phased and procedure-dependent entry criteria as (more and more) installed in the Belgian voluntary return programme (chapter 3). We therefore argue that AVRR programmes need to target a broad group of migrants, and, that for the Belgian programme, the current time-phase and procedure-dependent entry criteria need to be revised and reduced as much as possible. We hereby also plea to change the current policy that migrants who are already detained in a detention centre cannot access any more the AVRR programme. In our view, access to the AVRR programme should not be determined by migrants' time living in the host country and/or his/her residence status and documents, but needs to depart out of migrants' needs to receive particular support and counselling. This counselling support provides opportunities for migrants to reflect upon a possible return, and, if they want to do so, to determine how they want to realize this process of returning. AVRR policies thus need to be as broad as possible, through given all migrants, regardless their type (or lack) of residence document, their time living in Belgium or their nationality, access to the programme, and to enable returnees also to take time to prepare and to organize their return processes.

11.4.4 Flexible support and social guidance

By focusing on what returnees and social workers in the country of origin considered supportive in returnees' return and reintegration processes, this research revealed that flexibility in the way the budget can be allocated to different types of support and the provision of social guidance by a practitioner in the country of origin were two highly valued good practices of reintegration support. This flexibility and the social guidance both created possibilities for

returnees to negotiate the interpretations of what was supportive for one's reintegration, and as such, made it possible to connect the programme with returnees' life-worlds and meaning-making processes and to respect returnees' dignity.

The stories of the social workers also showed that obtaining insight into returnees' needs, in order to be able to provide tailored support, demanded an in-depth understanding of the specific contexts in which the reintegration support is implemented, and a deep relationship of trust between the practitioner and the returnee. Such a relationship of trust requested time to be built up, but formed a crucial element to create collaboration and a common language between social worker and returnee, and to search for the best possible way to spend the allocated reintegration budget. Further, such a trustful relationship provided a highly valued humane aspect to the support. The participating returnees valued the availability of the social workers, as it reassured them that they always could rely on somebody, and they also valued the concern they felt from the social worker.

Therefore, AVRR programmes need to be cautious to avoid a one-sited focus on economic support and sustainable investments, and on strictly pre-structured and predefined eligible types of support, since this may evoke the risk of losing sight of the liveability and dignity of returnees' post-return situations and the importance of the social guidance in the reintegration process. Moreover, we argue that these results stressed the major role and importance of the social worker in the host country, since they functioned as mediators between the host country's programme's objectives and the needs, contexts, possibilities and interpretations of the returnee. The results showed that the social workers needed to have a certain degree of freedom and also sufficient expertise to be able to fulfil this role as mediator. Hence, this urges for sufficient support and training of these local practitioners, who play a vital role in the implementation of the reintegration support (Koser, 2001).

11.4.5 Monitoring post-return situations and reintegration support

This research showed that including returnees' personal evaluations is an indispensable element when we want to gain insight into their post-return situations and wellbeing, and the possible impact of the reintegration support onto both elements, rather than comparing the outcomes of return processes or their sustainability with a particular norm (such as the absence of remigration). Although the longitudinal follow-up of returnees is a labour-intensive process, we argue that policy makers should invest in regular in-depth and longitudinal studies on returnees' perspectives and living situations, since this forms an important feedback mechanism for the programmes. Further, also the views and

perspectives of local practitioners who are implementing the reintegration support in the host country needs to be studied regularly, since their perspectives can reveal important tensions between the AVRR programme objectives and the possibilities the reintegration support creates in the countries of origin.

11.5 Limitations of the research

The findings of this research need to be interpreted in light of the limitations of the adopted methodological approach. In the following section, we reflect on the main limitations of this research.

11.5.1 Limited duration of follow-up

Although this research realized a unique mid-term longitudinal follow-up of returnees, going beyond a static, single measurement moment of return processes, our follow-up remains relatively short, in particular given that we know that the impact of migration processes can take up to ten to fifteen years to eventuate (Rogge, 1994). A continued long-term follow-up of returnees' post-return experiences over a longer period of time could therefore enlarge our insights into the dynamics of return processes. Furthermore, also a multi-sited longitudinal follow-up of the respondents who were detained in detention centres would have brought valuable insights in the processes of return migration and the impact of the absence of choice in these return processes. However, methodological and ethical constraints did not enable us to follow-up the respondents who were deported to the country of origin.

11.5.2 Limitations regarding the composition of the participant group

The composition of the respondent groups of the different studies entailed some particular limitations.

First, the drop-out rate we were faced with in our longitudinal follow-up might have impacted our findings, given that those respondents who dropped out could have had particular lived realities and views that might have differed from those covered in our study.

Second, we only included migrants returning within the Belgian AVRR programmes. Including other groups of returnees, such as migrants returning without support or only with a flight ticket, could have yielded additional or different findings of the return experiences of returnees with a precarious residence status in the host country.

Third, we only focused on the perspectives of the returnees themselves. However, also the perspectives and views of people in the returnees' immediate

environment or in the broader local community on return and reintegration processes could have provided important insights.

Fourth, in order to enable the careful contextualization that is needed to make an in-depth study of the respondents' post-return situations, we adopted a country-specific research design, and limited our study setting to one host country, Belgium, and two neighbouring countries of return, Armenia and Georgia. This limits the generalizability of the study findings to other groups and countries. However, our results out of this country-specific approach may act as comparative case studies for return processes in other regions, such as North Africa, the Middle East, and the Balkan region (Black *et al*., 2004; Bloemenraad, 2013; De Bree *et al*., 2010; Huttunen, 2010; Pedersen, 2003; Riiskjaer & Nielsson, 2008). Without aiming to compare regions in this study, in chapter 5, we could present some first impressions about possible differences from other country-specific research.

Next, the local partner organizations implementing the reintegration support in these two specific countries were both organizations that had been involved in the Belgian reintegration programme since its early beginning and were experienced in supporting returnees from various West European host countries (Caritas International, 2013). Also both social workers had been supporting returnees for several years (see chapter 9). Consequently, this may have created a more positive view on the received reintegration support than would be found when support is given by organizations and practitioners who are less experienced in this field. At the same time, this selection of experienced practitioners might also have enabled to articulate the elements of the support that were considered as supportive.

Finally, although we included the perspective of various actors within the Belgian AVRR programme, the perspective of the Belgian reintegration partner, was not studied. However, we found several indications that also this partner functioned as an important mediator between the programme's objectives and the needs, contexts, possibilities and interpretations of the returnee and the social workers in the country of origin. Furthermore, the specific structure and approach of an NGO as reintegration partner has its influence on the way the reintegration support is implemented and their role within AVRR policies can also lead to further legitimation of governments' return policies and may entail the risk for NGO's to lose a part of their autonomy and focus on returnees' wellbeing (Koch, 2014; Landy, 2015; Van Houte & Davids, 2008). Hence, it might be crucial to also study the perspective and the role of this actor, and the way its role shapes, and is shaped by, the perspective of the other actors.

11.5.3 Limitations regarding the use of interpreters and regarding positionalities

Although the use of interpreters helped to overcome both language and cultural barriers between researcher and respondents (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003), because of the long period of data collection and the respondents' different mother tongues, we had to work with several interpreters in each country, which diminished the similarities in the translations (Edwards, 1998). Further, although the use of an interpreter and the specific profile of the interpreter always influence research data (Edwards, 1998; Jacobsen & Landau, 2003), our use of the social workers who had a professional relationship with the respondent as interpreters during several interviews, might have enlarged this influence. However, this was partially solved through asking other interpreters to translate parts of the interview for a second time, in order to ensure the quality of the translations and uncover possible tensions due the positionality of the interpreter. Finally, we acknowledge that both our intensive collaboration with the social workers in the country of origin as gateway to reach the participants, and the researcher's own positionality and strong connection with Caritas Belgium increased our success of realizing a longitudinal follow-up of the returnees. However, this also created specific power relations within the research design (e.g., between social worker and participants; between social worker and researcher; between researcher and participants) (Hopkins, 2010), which might have induced ethical challenges for the informed consent of the respondents, and might have influenced respondents' answers (see chapter 1, 1.7.4).

11.6 Implications for further research

The research importantly contributed to insights into the return processes and lived experiences of migrants who had a precarious residence status in the host country and the practices of assisted voluntary return and reintegration support. Nevertheless, the findings and the above mentioned limitations reveal important direction for further research on returnees with a precarious residence status in the host country.

First, there is a need for continued long-term follow-up of returnees' post-return experiences over a longer period of time. Expanding the follow-up period to five to ten years after return would enlarge our insights into the dynamics of return processes and return experiences. Further, a longer follow-up would allow to clarify whether the symbolic ties our participants narrated on continue, weaken or rather transform on a longer term. A longer temporal dimension in studying return and reintegration processes would also allow increased clarity about the continuing, weakening or transforming impact of the migration experiences, and

improve our insights into whether there might be something like a 'returnee identity' for these returnees.

Second, the study results imply that more research is needed on the return and reintegration processes of other groups of migrants returning while having a precarious residence status in the host country, such as migrants returning independently, or within the AVR programme yet only with travel support. Following several other scholars (Drotbohm, 2011; Golash-Boza, 2014; Peutz, 2006), we also argue that the post-return situations of migrants who are deported need to be studied more intensively. Including such various groups would allow, among other elements, to further explore the meaning of 'choice' in return processes, and its impact on return experiences and migrants' post-return situations. However, to improve our insights into migrants' return and reintegration experiences, it is also important to focus more on the perceptions and views of people in the returnees' immediate environment or in the broader local community. Returnees' reintegration process is a relational process, a process of re-establishing the social and economic ties that define the returnee as a member of a community (Hammond, 2004). This involves that the return of migrants to the country of origin receives meaning in relation to others: the experience of return is not only shaped by those who come back, but also by those who remained ('stayees') and their perceptions of the returnee (Eastmond, 2002; Markowitz & Stefansson, 2004). Further, research on the perspectives of stayees would also allow investigating whether the transnational ties of returnees have an impact beyond the individual (see chapter 6). Further, enlarging our insights into the connection between transnationalism and return migration, and incorporating a broad and multi-layered view on transnationalism also urge to study the meaning of transnational ties with returnees for the recipient of this tie (migrants or non-migrants) in the host country.

Finally, we argue that our understanding of the practices of reintegration support can be increased by continuing research on the perspectives of practitioners who are implementing the AVRR support in various settings and various origin countries. Last, more research is needed on the role and perspectives of the organizations in the host countries, that function as reintegration partners of the host countries' governments in the implementation of AVRR programmes.

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Nederlandstalige samenvatting

Inleiding

De terugkeer van migranten zonder wettige of permanente verblijfsvergunning (i.e. migranten met een precair verblijfsstatuut in het 'gastland') van het Europese gastland naar het land van herkomst staat vandaag hoog op de agenda van het migratiebeleid van vele Europese landen. Door recente ontwikkelingen op het vlak van migratie in Europa kan worden verwacht dat deze focus in de komende jaren nog zal toenemen.

In het terugkeerbeleid van Europese landen wordt onderscheid gemaakt tussen '*vrijwillige terugkeer*' en *'gedwongen terugkeer'*. Vanuit het beleidsperspectief van het gastland verwijst een 'vrijwillige terugkeer' naar migranten die 'uit vrije wil' terugkeren, of, migranten die zonder het gebruik van fysieke dwang gehoor geven aan 'het bevel om het grondgebied te verlaten'[1]. 'Gedwongen terugkeer' of deportatie verwijst naar gedwongen verwijderingen van migranten, meestal na een opsluiting in een detentiecentrum.

Hoewel er prioritair wordt ingezet op het stimuleren van vrijwillige terugkeer, stellen onderzoekers een uitbreiding vast van de omvang en van het gebruik van detentie in de Europese Unie (EU). Terzelfdertijd zorgde de sterke nadruk op vrijwillige terugkeer de voorbij decennia voor een toename van programma's om vrijwillige terugkeer te stimuleren, mogelijk te maken en te ondersteunen (zogenaamde assisted voluntary return (AVR) programma's). Dergelijke programma's worden uitgevoerd in alle Europese lidstaten en bieden administratieve, logistieke en financiële ondersteuning aan (voornamelijk) asielaanvragers, afgewezen asielaanvragers en migranten zonder wettige verblijfsdocumenten die 'vrijwillig' terugkeren naar het land van herkomst. Een dergelijke '*ondersteunde vrijwillige terugkeer*' wordt in het terugkeerbeleid van gastlanden omschreven als een waardig, humaan en kosteneffectief alternatief voor gedwongen terugkeer of deportatie. Deze programma's bieden vaak ook re-integratieondersteuning (assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR)) in het land van herkomst, als een extra stimulans om migranten aan te moedigen om terug te keren en om hun terugkeer duurzaam te maken.

Ook België heeft een goed uitgebouwd AVR-programma, gedeeltelijk ingebed in een structureel, nationaal programma en aangevuld met steun uit EU-fondsen. Het programma biedt verschillende vormen van ondersteuning (namelijk ondersteuning om de reis mogelijk te maken en re-integratieondersteuning in het land van herkomst om het leven na terugkeer op te starten). De financiële re-integratieondersteuning wordt in het Belgische programma verleend in de vorm van 'in-kind' ondersteuning (i.e. ondersteuning in natura): migranten krijgen geen

[1] Een bevel om het grondgebied te verlaten wordt gegeven aan migranten die een negatief antwoord ontvangen op hun asielaanvraag of migranten die geen geldig verblijfsvergunning hebben.

cash geld, maar worden begeleid door hulpverleners in het land van herkomst om het geld te besteden volgens de richtlijnen van het programma.

Ondanks deze nadruk op (vrijwillige) terugkeer is er weinig onderzoek naar hoe de doelen van AVR-programma's evolueren in relatie tot de ruimere verschuivingen die de voorbije jaren werden vastgesteld in het algemene migratiebeleid van gastlanden (i.e. verschuivingen naar steeds restrictiever migratie- en integratiebeleid). Ook is er weinig onderzoek naar de perspectieven van migranten in detentie en is er heel weinig longitudinale opvolging van mensen die terugkeren via een vrijwillig terugkeerprogramma. Hierdoor ontbreekt het aan kennis over de terugkeer- en re-integratie-ervaringen van deze terugkeerders, wat kan leiden tot grote tegenstellingen tussen het beleidsdiscours over terugkeer en de realiteit en ervaringen van terugkeerders. Verder is er, ondanks het stijgend aantal migranten die terugkeren met AVRR-ondersteuning en de meerwaarde die wordt toegeschreven aan re-integratieondersteuning in het bewerkstelligen van 'duurzame terugkeer', weinig inzicht in de wijze waarop re-integratieondersteuning concreet wordt geïmplementeerd in de landen van herkomst. Eveneens is er weinig inzicht in de wijze waarop deze ondersteuning de levensomstandigheden en het welzijn van terugkeerders beïnvloedt. Het ontbreken van de perspectieven van de terugkeerders zelf, alsook van de sociaal werkers die deze terugkeerders ondersteunen in de landen van herkomst belemmert de ontwikkeling van een terugkeer- en re-integratieondersteuning die aansluit bij de noden van terugkeerders en de context van het land van herkomst.

De nadruk op terugkeer zorgde ook voor meer wetenschappelijke studies over het fenomeen terugkeermigratie. Studies wijzen er op dat terugkeerprocessen moeten gezien worden als gefaseerde, langdurige, gelaagde en complexe processen. Er wordt hierbij gewezen op de grote diversiteit aan terugkeerervaringen en op de grote invloed van het gevoel van de 'vrijwilligheid' van de terugkeer en van de 'voorbereiding' op het vertrek op hun re-integratieprocessen en levensomstandigheden na terugkeer. Desondanks blijft de kennis over de terugkeer- en re-integratieprocessen van terugkeerders met een precair verblijfsstatuut in het gastland beperkt. Zo is er weinig inzicht in het beslissingsproces inzake terugkeer van deze migranten. Verder wordt reeds aangetoond dat het re-integratieproces van deze groep terugkeerders op materieel, sociaal en emotioneel vlak vaak zeer moeizaam verloopt. Deze studies zorgen voor waardevolle inzichten in de moeilijkheden waarmee deze terugkeerders geconfronteerd worden, maar vertrekken vaak vanuit voor-gedefinieerde domeinen die belangrijk zouden zijn voor een succesvolle terugkeer. Hierdoor wordt voorbijgegaan aan het belang dat terugkeerders zelf aan verschillende levensdomeinen hechten. Bovendien zijn deze studies vaak gebaseerd op eenmalige data-verzamelingen na terugkeer, wat geen voldoende

recht doet aan het holistische, dynamische en procesmatige karakter van terugkeerprocessen en levensomstandigheden na terugkeer.

Onderzoeksvragen en doelen van het onderzoek

De tekortkomingen in de huidige kennis over de terugkeerprocessen van mensen met een precair statuut in het gastland en in het bijzonder migranten die terugkeren met AVRR-ondersteuning, duiden de behoefte aan voor longitudinaal en multi-sited onderzoek[2] waarbij de ervaringen, perspectieven en betekenisgeving van de terugkeerders zelf centraal staan. Verder is er behoefte aan onderzoek naar de concrete invulling en uitwerking van re-integratieondersteuning en het perspectief van de verschillende betrokken actoren (gastland, sociaal werkers in de landen van herkomst en terugkeerders) op deze ondersteuning. De centrale doelstelling van dit doctoraatsonderzoek is het genereren van meer inzicht in het dynamische en subjectieve karakter van terugkeerprocessen, en in de levensomstandigheden en het welzijn van migranten die terugkeren met AVRR-ondersteuning. Meer concreet zijn we geïnteresseerd in het nagaan van:

- evoluties in het Belgische beleid met betrekking tot AVR-programma's in relatie tot ruimere evoluties in het migratiebeleid;
- de ervaringen, levensomstandigheden en perspectieven van terugkeerders, vanaf het moment dat ze in het gastland de beslissing hebben gemaakt om terug te keren en gedurende de eerste twee jaar na terugkeer;
- de perspectieven van terugkeerders en sociaal werkers in de landen van herkomst op de re-integratieondersteuning;
- en de perspectieven van mensen in detentiecentra op hun gedwongen terugkeer naar het land van herkomst.

Hiermee beoogt het onderzoek niet enkel om bij te dragen aan de empirische kennis over de terugkeerprocessen en perspectieven van migranten met een precair verblijfsstatuut in het gastland en aan de inzichten in de praktijk van re-integratieondersteuning, maar streeft het onderzoek er eveneens naar om implicaties en aanbevelingen te formuleren voor het vrijwillige terugkeerbeleid en voor hulpverleners die terugkeerders ondersteunen.

[2] Multi-sited onderzoek verwijst naar het gegeven dat data verzameld worden op verschillende geografische locaties, wat het mogelijk maakt om het migratieproces van mensen te volgen.

Onderzoeksdesign

Om een antwoord te vinden op de vooropgestelde onderzoeksvragen werd dit onderzoek opgesplitst in vijf studies.

De *eerste studie* (hoofdstuk 2) betreft een voorbereidend onderzoek waarop de andere studies van het doctoraatsonderzoek inhoudelijk en methodologisch verder bouwen. In deze multi-sited studie werden de terugkeerervaringen van 21 Nepalese migranten onderzocht die terugkeerden met het Belgische AVRR-programma en re-integratieondersteuning ontvingen van de Belgische NGO Caritas International. Nepal werd gekozen als case studie gezien het relatief hoge aantal mensen dat vanuit België terugkeert naar dit land en het feit dat veel Nepalezen de Engelse taal machtig zijn, wat het communicatieproces tijdens deze exploratieve studie vereenvoudigde. De data voor deze studie werden verzameld aan de hand van semi-gestructureerde interviews die enerzijds polsten naar de verwachtingen van kandidaat-terugkeerders in België over hun aankomend vertrek naar het land van herkomst en anderzijds, in een tweede interview na terugkeer, naar de evaluaties van terugkeerde migranten van hun huidige en vroegere levensomstandigheden. De ervaringen van deze terugkeerders doorheen de verschillende fasen van het terugkeerproces werden in kaart gebracht. Op die manier werd nagegaan of hun perspectieven evolueerden doorheen de tijd en welke factoren mogelijk een impact hadden op de evaluatie van hun levensomstandigheden.

De *tweede studie* (hoofdstuk 3) bestudeert de evoluties in het Belgische AVR-programma van bij de opstart in 1984 tot in 2013. Dit gebeurde aan de hand van de analyse van beleidsdocumenten, beleidsnota's, jaar- en onderzoeksrapporten over het Belgische AVR-programma.

De *derde studie* vormt de kern van dit doctoraatsonderzoek. De studie had als doel inzicht te verwerven in de ervaringen van mensen die terugkeren met AVRR-ondersteuning en in hun perspectief op het terugkeerproces, op hun huidige en vroegere levensomstandigheden, op hun welzijn en op de ontvangen re-integratieondersteuning. In een multi-sited en longitudinale studie werd het terugkeerproces van een groep Armeense en Georgische migranten opgevolgd, vanaf het moment dat zij de beslissing hebben gemaakt om terug te keren met het Belgische AVRR-programma met de steun van Caritas International, tot twee jaar na terugkeer. De data werden verzameld aan de hand van semi-gestructureerde interviews met de respondenten op drie momenten: voor hun vertrek uit België, toen ze beslist hadden om terug te keren (meetmoment 1; 85 respondenten); tijdens het eerste jaar na terugkeer in het land van herkomst (meetmoment 2; 79 respondenten) en tijdens het tweede jaar na hun terugkeer (meetmoment 3; 65 respondenten). Er werd gekozen om het terugkeerproces van Armeense en

Georgische migranten op te volgen, aangezien een relatief hoog aantal migranten in België via AVRR-ondersteuning naar deze twee buurlanden terugkeert. Bovendien maakte de keuze om het onderzoek te beperken tot twee landen van herkomst met een gelijkaardige socio-economische en politieke situatie het mogelijk om een diepgaande en gecontextualiseerde studie te maken van de levensomstandigheden van de respondenten na terugkeer. De data van deze studie werden op verschillende manieren geanalyseerd:

- De eerste analyse, gebaseerd op de data van het eerste meetmoment (voor vertrek), richtte zich op de terugkeermotieven, de ervaringen van vrijwilligheid van de terugkeer en de levensomstandigheden van de respondenten voor hun vertrek uit België (hoofdstuk 4).
- In een tweede analyse, gebaseerd op de data uit de interviews na terugkeer (meetmoment 2 en 3), werden de terugkeerervaringen en de levensomstandigheden van de respondenten gedurende de eerste twee jaar na terugkeer onderzocht, met specifieke aandacht voor evoluties in hun persoonlijke evaluaties van hun situatie en hun welzijn (hoofdstuk 5).
- In een derde analyse, eveneens gebaseerd op de data uit de interviews na terugkeer (meetmoment 2 en 3), werd onderzocht of de terugkeerders persoonlijk, institutionele of symbolische transnationale banden hadden behouden met België en of dit transnationalisme een impact had op hun levensomstandigheden en welzijn na terugkeer (hoofdstuk 6).
- Bij een vierde analyse werden vier cases van Armeense terugkeerders geselecteerd. Op basis van alle interviews met deze vier respondenten (meetmoment 1, 2 en 3) werd onderzocht hoe deze terugkeerders hun terugkeer ervaren en hoe hun welzijn veranderde doorheen het terugkeerproces (hoofdstuk 7).
- Ten slotte werden alle interviews opnieuw geanalyseerd om inzicht te krijgen in de perspectieven van terugkeerders op de ontvangen re-integratieondersteuning. Deze data werden aangevuld met informatie uit de begeleidingsrapporten opgesteld door de hulpverleners die instaan voor de AVRR-begeleiding voor en na terugkeer (hoofdstuk 8).

De *vierde studie* bestudeert het perspectief van de sociaal werkers in de landen van herkomst die instaan voor de re-integratieondersteuning na terugkeer (hoofdstuk 9). Er werd een semi-gestructureerd interview afgenomen met de twee sociaal werkers die de Armeense en Georgische terugkeerders uit dit onderzoek hebben ondersteund na terugkeer. Op deze manier werd getracht inzicht te verwerven in de wijze waarop de re-integratieondersteuning geïmplementeerd wordt en in het perspectief van deze sociaal werkers op terugkeer en terugkeerondersteuning en op hun rol in dit proces.

De *vijfde* en laatste *studie* focust op het perspectief van mensen in detentiecentra. Aan de hand van semi-gestructureerde interviews werden Armeense (n=18) en Georgische (n=13) migranten in Belgische detentiecentra bevraagd over hun perspectief op hun gedwongen terugkeer naar hun land van herkomst, als een soort 'tegen-perspectief' tegenover de perspectieven van mensen die terugkeren via een AVRR-programma (hoofdstuk 10).

In de afsluitende *discussie* worden de inzichten die verworven werden doorheen de verschillende studies samengebracht en besproken. Verder worden de beperkingen van het onderzoek aangegeven en worden implicaties geformuleerd voor de praktijk, voor het beleid en voor verder onderzoek (hoofdstuk 11).

Belangrijkste conclusies

Longitudinale opvolging van de ervaringen van terugkeerders

De vastgestelde evoluties in de levensomstandigheden van de respondenten na terugkeer en in hun perspectief op hun terugkeer- en re-integratieprocessen bevestigen het dynamische karakter van terugkeerprocessen. De longitudinale opvolging van deze terugkeerders toont dat terugkeren naar het land van herkomst een zeer ambigue ervaring is. De respondenten proberen na terugkeer hun leven terug op te bouwen, waarbij de terugkeer naar het land van herkomst vaak zorgt voor zowel het gevoel bepaalde dingen '(terug)gewonnen' te hebben, als voor sterke gevoelens van verlies. Hun situatie na terugkeer en hun evaluatie ervan bevat dus zowel positieve als negatieve elementen. Vanuit deze vaststelling geven we aan dat naar terugkeer zou moeten gekeken worden als een 'toekomstgericht sociaal project', waarbij mensen trachten een toekomst uit te bouwen. In wat volgt worden de bevindingen uit de verschillende studies samengebracht en wordt aangetoond hoe de perspectieven en ervaringen van de terugkeerders een ander licht werpen op belangrijke thema's in het huidige debat over terugkeermigratie.

'Vrijwillige' terugkeer

Hoofdstuk 4 toont dat verschillende factoren een invloed hebben op de terugkeerbeslissing van de respondenten. Toch spelen vooral de moeilijke levensomstandigheden in België en het precaire verblijfsstatuut voor velen een beslissende rol. Deze factoren 'dwingen' de respondenten om te beslissen om terug te keren. Maar ook andere factoren, zoals de verwachtingen van familieleden of gezondheidsproblemen, hebben een grote impact en worden vaak ervaren als 'dwingende factoren' in hun terugkeerbeslissing. Deze bevindingen

sluiten aan bij voorgaand onderzoek dat de 'vrijwilligheid' van 'ondersteunde vrijwillige terugkeer', alsook het onderscheid dat in het beleid wordt gemaakt tussen 'vrijwillige' en 'gedwongen' terugkeer sterk in vraag stelt. Niettemin zijn er ook respondenten die sterk benadrukken dat het hun eigen beslissing was om terug te keren. Hoofdstuk 7 toont aan dat het label van 'keuze' een belangrijke rol kan spelen in het rationaliseren van de terugkeer. Terugkeren naar het land van herkomst kan tevens een manier zijn voor de respondenten om terug controle te krijgen over hun leven, waardoor de terugkeerbeslissing wordt gepercipieerd als een 'vrijwillige keuze', ondanks de aanwezigheid van sterke dwingende factoren of de afwezigheid van enig verlangen om terug te keren. Dit keuze-element lijkt er ook voor te zorgen dat er enige openheid is om terugkeer bespreekbaar te maken, wat totaal afwezig is bij de geïnterviewde respondenten in de detentiecentra, die de mogelijkheid dat ze gedwongen teruggestuurd kunnen worden zelfs totaal ontkennen.

Op basis van deze bevindingen concluderen we dat het label 'vrijwillige terugkeer' inderdaad niet aansluit bij de ervaringen van deze respondenten die terugkeren met een AVRR-programma, maar hun terugkeer labellen als een 'gedwongen terugkeer' is eveneens problematisch, aangezien hierdoor de belangrijke betekenis van 'keuze' wordt genegeerd. Een dichotoom denken over vrijwillige of gedwongen terugkeer sluit dus niet aan bij de ervaringen van de terugkeerders die hier een meer genuanceerd standpunt over hadden.

Verder tonen verschillende hoofdstukken aan dat een duidelijk idee hebben van hoe het leven na terugkeer vorm zal krijgen (een idee dat vaak wordt mogelijk gemaakt door de geboden re-integratieondersteuning) bijdraagt tot een grotere bereidheid om terug te keren en het terugkeerproces, alsook het eerste jaar na terugkeer, iets gemakkelijker lijkt te maken. Aan de andere kant toont hoofdstuk 7 ook aan dat een positieve evaluatie van de terugkeerervaring vooral afhangt van de levensomstandigheden en het algemeen gevoel van welzijn na terugkeer, wat de invloed van de oorspronkelijke bereidheid of van de vrijwilligheid om terug te keren terug nuanceert.

De materiële situatie na terugkeer

Het onderzoek bevestigt het centrale belang van de materiële situatie na terugkeer (voldoende inkomen en een geschikte woning) voor het welzijn van de respondenten na terugkeer. Het onderzoek toont aan dat verschillende terugkeerders in staat waren een inkomen te verwerven na terugkeer, maar combineren hiervoor vaak de 'business' of 'inkomsten-genererende activiteit' die werd opgestart met het re-integratiebudget met tijdelijke of informele jobs. Die inkomsten-genererende activiteiten zijn voor de respondenten zeer belangrijk,

aangezien het voor velen meestal de enige manier is om een inkomen te verwerven. Deze activiteiten blijven echter ook heel precair door het kleine budget waarmee de activiteit dient te worden opgestart en het gebrek aan verschillende vormen van eigen "kapitaal" bij de terugkeerders (bv. financiële middelen, specifieke kennis, ervaring en/of sociale netwerken die het opstarten van een business ondersteunen of transnationale banden met het gastland). Beide elementen worden (op zijn minst ten dele) veroorzaakt door hun migratie-ervaringen en door hun moeilijke leefsituatie als afgewezen asielaanvrager of migrant zonder geldige verblijfsdocumenten. Het inkomen uit de beroepsactiviteiten is dan ook vaak slechts net voldoende om in het eigen levensonderhoud te voorzien, waardoor er voor respondenten die niet kunnen terugvallen op verdere steun vanuit hun sociaal netwerk, geen speling is om het hoofd te bieden aan een onverwachte tegenslag of bijkomende kosten. Dit heeft er voor verschillende respondenten toe geleid dat ze deze initieel opgestarte beroepsactiviteiten moesten beëindigen. De kwetsbaarheid van de inkomsten-genererende activiteiten van de respondenten wordt nog versterkt door de instabiele economische en politieke situatie in de landen van herkomst. Volgens een van de sociaal werkers is dan ook 'een dosis geluk' nodig om de business overeind te houden.

Multi-dimensionaliteit van de situatie na terugkeer en de terugkeerervaringen

Aanvullend bij het grote belang van de materiële situatie na terugkeer toont hoofdstuk 5 aan dat ook nog heel wat andere elementen of levensdomeinen een belangrijke rol spelen in hoe terugkeerders de levensomstandigheden na terugkeer evalueren. Vooreerst tonen de verhalen van de respondenten aan dat alle elementen nauw verbonden zijn en elkaar sterk beïnvloeden. Daarnaast tonen de bevindingen ook aan dat de terugkeerders vaak contrasten ervaren tussen verschillende domeinen (bijvoorbeeld in slechte materiële omstandigheden leven, maar een sterk gevoel hebben van thuis te horen in het land van herkomst) en dat de waarde die gehecht wordt aan de verschillende elementen sterk kan verschillen van persoon tot persoon. Dit toont niet alleen de mogelijke ambiguïteit aan van de terugkeerervaring, maar het geeft ook aan dat het erg moeilijk te voorspellen is hoe mensen hun situatie na terugkeer zullen evalueren. Vandaar dat we het cruciale belang benadrukken om steeds de perspectieven van terugkeerders te betrekken en in kaart te brengen welke betekenis zij toekennen aan hun situatie, in het bijzonder wanneer onderzoekers, beleidsmakers of hulpverleners trachten om inzicht te verwerven in het 'resultaat' van terugkeerprocessen. Enigszins opmerkelijk bleven bepaalde elementen afwezig in de verhalen van de respondenten, in het bijzonder mogelijke gevoelens van socio-culturele schaamte die soms verbonden zijn met een 'mislukte migratie' of het

ervaren van moeilijkheden in contacten met mensen die niet migreerden. Dit wijst opnieuw op het grote belang van het gecontextualiseerd bestuderen van terugkeerprocessen.

De verhalen van de respondenten benadrukken dan wel weer het grote belang van het hebben van een toekomstperspectief, van het gevoel van agency en van gevoelens van veiligheid en zekerheid; elementen die vanuit het perspectief van de terugkeerders de brede invulling van 'ontologische veiligheid' krijgen. Daarnaast bleek ook het hebben en het onderhouden van transnationale banden met mensen in België vaak erg belangrijk voor het welzijn van terugkeerders. Ten slotte toont hoofdstuk 7 ook aan hoe het perspectief van de respondenten op hun terugkeer verandert in het licht van veranderende levensomstandigheden en verschuivingen in hun gevoel van welzijn na terugkeer. Beslissingen, gevoelens van 'belonging' ('thuis-horen') en de betekenis van migratie-ervaringen worden in die zin ook vaak geherinterpreteerd en opnieuw geëvalueerd in het licht van de veranderingen en verschuivingen, om op die manier de terugkeer een plaats te geven en om te kunnen omgaan met tegenstellingen die ervaren worden in de situatie na terugkeer.

De wens om terug te migreren – gevoelens van 'belonging'

Ten slotte tonen de resultaten van dit onderzoek dat de wens van migranten om opnieuw te migreren niet altijd een indicator is van een gebrek aan 'goede' re-integratie in het land van herkomst. Hoofdstuk 6 toont aan dat bijna alle terugkeerders het verlangen hadden om terug te keren naar België, maar voor velen is dit een illustratie van hun verlangen om verbonden te blijven met België, om hun transnationale banden met mensen in België en met het land op zich te behouden, eerder dan een wens om te re-emigreren en zich opnieuw te vestigen in het gastland. Verder fungeert de idee om terug te keren naar België als hypothetisch back-up plan, als een moreel hulpmiddel om te kunnen omgaan met de moeilijkheden waarmee men wordt geconfronteerd na terugkeer. Het hebben van transnationale banden met België heeft dus een belangrijke emotionele waarde voor deze terugkeerders. Hun gevoel van transnationale 'belonging' was belangrijk voor hun terugkeerervaringen en hun welzijn na terugkeer, net zozeer als het gevoel van thuishoren en deel uitmaken van de Belgische maatschappij centraal staat in de ervaringen en verhalen van de mensen in detentie (hoofdstuk 10). Beide hoofdstukken tonen aan dat de legale verblijfsstatus van migranten heel vaak los staat van hun gevoelens van 'belonging', en tonen de grote last en de zware gevolgen aan van bepaalde structurele beperkingen, zoals het niet hebben van legaal burgerschap of het recht op mobiliteit. Deze structurele barrières houden weinig tot geen rekening houden met de sterk aanwezige gevoelens van

'belonging' van migranten, wat finaal dan ook een erg negatieve impact kan hebben op hun welzijn.

Perspectieven op re-integratieondersteuning

De bovenstaande bevindingen wijzen op een sterke tegenstelling tussen enerzijds de realiteit en de ervaringen van migranten na hun terugkeer met AVRR-ondersteuning en anderzijds de doelstelling van het re-integratiebeleid om de duurzame re-integratie van terugkeerders te ondersteunen. Het toont aan dat het doel om bij te dragen tot 'duurzame terugkeer' door het beleid veelal wordt uitgetekend zonder rekening te houden met de structurele factoren die een grote invloed hebben op de mogelijkheden van terugkeerders om te re-integreren in hun land van herkomst. Op deze manier wordt niet alleen de complexiteit van terugkeerprocessen onderschat, maar wordt er eveneens uitgegaan van een sterke individualiserende benadering van het fenomeen van re-integratie, waarbij de nadruk wordt gelegd op de individuele verantwoordelijkheid van migranten om een succesvolle re-integratie te realiseren.

Tegelijkertijd duiden verschillende hoofdstukken op de belangrijke waarde die de re-integratieondersteuning heeft voor de terugkeerders, zowel voor hun vertrek uit België als na hun terugkeer naar het land van herkomst. De ondersteuning zorgt voor een grotere bereidheid en een beter voorbereid-zijn om terug te keren en voor een duidelijker doel na terugkeer. De financiële ondersteuning wordt vaak ervaren als een belangrijke 'duw in de juiste richting' en heeft een positieve invloed op de zelfwaarde van de terugkeerders en op hun emotioneel welzijn. Daarnaast wordt de sociale begeleiding na terugkeer als zeer ondersteunend ervaren in de terugkeer- en re-integratieprocessen.

Tot slot brengt dit onderzoek de perspectieven van verschillende actoren (het beleidsperspectief van het gastland, het perspectief van de sociaal werkers in de landen van herkomst en het perspectief van de terugkeerders) op AVRR-programma's en re-integratieondersteuning samen. Het toont aan dat de verschillende belangen van de actoren kan leiden tot verschillende visies op de wijze waarop re-integratieondersteuning moet begrepen en geïmplementeerd worden. Belangrijke connecties of disconnecties in de visies van de verschillende actoren worden vastgesteld, in het bijzonder over de wijze waarop het re-integratiebudget dient te worden besteed, over de mogelijkheden die het budget creëert voor terugkeerders, over het belang van sociale begeleiding na terugkeer en over de wijze waarop re-integratieondersteuning wordt toegekend aan terugkeerders.

Implicaties voor beleid en praktijk

De bevindingen uit dit onderzoek leiden tot belangrijke implicaties voor het vrijwillige terugkeerbeleid en voor de hulpverleners die terugkeerders ondersteunen. Deze implicaties worden uitgewerkt in het laatste hoofdstuk van dit proefschrift.

Ten eerste moet erkend worden dat de doelgroep van AVRR-programma's, door hun specifiek migratietraject, door structurele factoren en door het gevoerde migratiebeleid in het gastland en in het land van herkomst, heel weinig middelen en kapitaal hebben om hun leven na terugkeer opnieuw op te bouwen. Het onderzoek toont aan dat de invoering van een verhoging van de re-integratieondersteuning voor terugkeerders die een 'business' willen opstarten na terugkeer gezorgd heeft voor heel wat meer mogelijkheden voor de terugkeerders en geleid heeft tot positievere evaluaties van de meerwaarde van de ontvangen ondersteuning. Niettemin zorgde de beperkte, eenmalige en kortdurende ondersteuning vaak voor zeer kwetsbare inkomsten-genererende activiteiten. Aanvullende financiële re-integratieondersteuning en begeleiding, toegekend aan terugkeerders na de eerste opstartfase van hun inkomsten-genererende activiteit, zou het mogelijk maken om precaire activiteiten meer zekerheid te geven.

Daarnaast moet ook ingezet worden op het wegwerken van verschillende barrières in het gastland die ertoe leiden dat asielaanvragers weinig middelen en kapitaal kunnen verzamelen tijdens hun verblijf in het gastland en dus op die manier ook hun re-integratie proces na terugkeer bemoeilijken (bijvoorbeeld de grote moeilijkheden die zij ondervinden om werk te vinden, onder meer door processen van discriminatie of taalbarrières of hun beperkte integratie in de maatschappij en in sociale netwerken in België, door het leven in een asielcentrum). Bovendien bemoeilijken ook elementen in het terugkeerbeleid, zoals de opgevoerde druk om zo snel mogelijk terug te keren en het verbod om terug te keren naar België in de eerste vijf jaar na terugkeer, het re-integratieproces van terugkeerders. Ook toont het onderzoek aan dat het niet voldoende is om mensen te stimuleren om duurzame investeringen te maken met het re-integratiebudget, maar dat het eveneens nodig is om voorwaarden te creëren zodat terugkeerders in staat zouden zijn om dergelijke investeringen te maken (bijvoorbeeld hen voldoende tijd geven voor vertrek, het creëren van menswaardige leefomstandigheden voor vertrek of een periode creëren na terugkeer waarin een deel van het re-integratiebudget gebruikt kan worden voor het dagelijkse overleven zodat terugkeerders hun project kunnen voorbereiden indien dat nodig is). Vervolgens is niet enkel aandacht nodig voor het 'voorbereidingsproces'. Dit onderzoek toont aan dat ook aandacht voor het 'afscheidsproces' van terugkeerders een belangrijke bijdrage kan leveren aan het welzijn na terugkeer. Ten slotte zou, om de structurele contextfactoren in de

landen van herkomst in rekening te kunnen brengen, de individuele re-integratieondersteuning aangevuld moeten worden met specifieke acties om de mogelijkheden van terugkeerders in het land van herkomst te vergroten en structurele barrières weg te werken (bijvoorbeeld voor de landen van herkomst uit dit onderzoek, Armenië en Georgië, zou het onder andere belangrijk zijn om de toegang tot gezondheidszorg te verhogen).

De resultaten van dit onderzoek (het belang van het hebben van een keuze – ook al is het een sterk gelimiteerde keuze – voor het welzijn van migranten, het belang van zowel praktisch als mentaal voorbereid te zijn op een terugkeer naar het land van herkomst en de belangrijke rol die een AVRR-programma hierin kan spelen) wijzen eveneens op het belang van het hanteren van ruime toegangscriteria voor het programma, zodat een terugkeer met AVRR-ondersteuning een mogelijke keuze is voor een ruime doelgroep aan migranten met een precair verblijfsstatuut in het gastland. Dit pleit voor het terugschroeven van de huidige beperkingen de gelegd worden inzake de toegang tot het programma, in het bijzonder wat betreft de korte periode die migranten maar krijgen om te beslissen om terug te keren naar het land van herkomst en daarnaast ook wat betreft de beperkende toegangscriteria gelieerd aan de verblijfsprocedure die ze hadden in België (hoofdstuk 3). Hieraan gelinkt pleiten wij er ook voor om mensen in detentiecentra zo veel als mogelijk toegang te geven tot het AVRR-programma.

Vervolgens wijzen de onderzoeksresultaten ook op het grote belang van het hebben van flexibiliteit in het toekennen van ondersteuning en het belang van sociale begeleiding door een hulpverlener in het land van herkomst. Deze twee elementen worden zowel door de terugkeerders als de sociaal werkers in het land van herkomst gewaardeerd als 'good practices' en zorgen ervoor dat de re-integratieondersteuning kan aangepast worden aan de specifieke context van het land van herkomst en aan de leefwereld en de betekenisgeving van de terugkeerder. De perspectieven van de sociaal werkers tonen aan dat een diepgaande kennis van de context van het land van herkomst en een vertrouwensrelatie met de terugkeerders nodig zijn om ondersteuning op maat te kunnen bieden. Een dergelijke vertrouwensrelatie opbouwen vergt tijd, maar is een voorwaarde om samen met de terugkeerder op zoek te gaan naar de beste manier om het re-integratiebudget te besteden. Dit sociale aspect van de begeleiding wordt tevens sterk gewaardeerd door de terugkeerders. Dit toont aan dat AVRR-programma's een eenzijdige focus op financiële ondersteuning en duurzame investeringen alsook strikt voor-gestructureerde vormen van ondersteuning moeten vermijden, aangezien men zo het risico loopt om voorbij te gaan aan de leefbaarheid en waardigheid van de situatie van terugkeerders en het belang van sociale begeleiding. Dit illustreert eveneens de centrale en cruciale rol van de hulpverleners in het land van herkomst, die bemiddelen tussen de noden

van de terugkeerder en de doelen van het programma van het gastland en toont het grote belang van een zekere vrijheid en deskundigheid van deze hulpverleners in het begeleidingsproces. Dit pleit voor aandacht voor voldoende training en ondersteuning van deze hulpverleners in het land van herkomst.

Op basis van onze onderzoeksresultaten stellen we tenslotte dat het steeds noodzakelijk is om de perspectieven van terugkeerders zelf te betrekken wanneer er wordt getracht om inzicht te verwerven in de levensomstandigheden en het welzijn van terugkeerders en in de mogelijke impact van re-integratieondersteuning op beide elementen, eerder dan het vergelijken van de 'uitkomsten' van terugkeerprocessen met een bepaalde norm (zoals de afwezigheid van re-emigratie). We zijn ervan overtuigd dat het noodzakelijk is om binnen een AVRR-programma op regelmatige tijdstippen longitudinale opvolgingen uit te voeren van de situatie en perspectieven te bestuderen van migranten die terugkeerden naar verschillende landen van herkomst. Bovendien is het belangrijk om tevens de stem van de hulpverleners in de landen van herkomst te betrekken in het evalueren en monitoren van het terugkeerprogramma.

Data storage fact sheets

Study 1
% Data Storage Fact Sheet

% Name/identifier study Perspectives of Nepali returnees on their return process
% Author: Ine Lietaert
% Date:11/02/2016

1. Contact details
==========

1a. Main researcher

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If a response is not received when using the above contact details, please send an email to data.pp@ugent.be or contact Data Management, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium.

2. Information about the datasets to which this sheet applies
==========
* Reference of the publication in which the datasets are reported:
Lietaert, I. (2016).Perspectives on return migration: A multi-sited, longitudinal study on the return processes of Armenian and Georgian migrants. (Doctoral dissertation)

Lietaert, I., Derluyn, I. & Broekaert, E. (2014). Returnees' perspectives on their re-migration processes. International Migration, 52(5), 144 – 158

* Which datasets in that publication does this sheet apply to?:
Semi-structured interviews with return migrants to Nepal

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Study 2
% Data Storage Fact Sheet

% Name/identifier study Policy analysis of developments in the Belgian AVR programme
% Author: Ine Lietaert
% Date:11/02/2016

1. Contact details
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* Reference of the publication in which the datasets are reported:
Lietaert, I. (2016).Perspectives on return migration: A multi-sited, longitudinal study on the return processes of Armenian and Georgian migrants. (Doctoral dissertation)

Lietaert, I., Broekaert, E., & Derluyn, I. (2016). From Social Instrument to Migration Management Tool: Assisted Voluntary Return Programmes – The Case of Belgium. Social Policy & Administration. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1111/spol.12185

* Which datasets in that publication does this sheet apply to?:
Document analysis of policy documents, policy notes, annual reports, and research reports

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Study 3
% Data Storage Fact Sheet

% Name/identifier study longitudinal follow-up of the return processes of Armenian and Georgian migrants returning with AVRR support
% Author: Ine Lietaert
% Date:11/02/2016

1. Contact details
==========

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* Reference of the publication in which the datasets are reported:
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Lietaert, I., Broekaert, E. and Derluyn, I. (accepted). Time Heals? A multi-sited, longitudinal case study on the lived experiences of returnees in Armenia. In Z., Vathi and R. King (Eds.), Return Migration and Psychosocial Wellbeing: Discourses, Policy-Making and Outcomes for Migrants and their Families. Routledge

Lietaert, I., Broekaert, E. and Derluyn, I. (accepted). The boundaries of transnationalism: the case of assisted voluntary return migrants. *Global Networks*.

* Which datasets in that publication does this sheet apply to?:

Semi-structured interviews with returned migrants in Georgia and Armenia and guidance reports of the provided assistance.

3. Information about the files that have been stored
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3a. Raw data
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3b. Other files
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 - [ ] other: ...
* Who has direct access to these other files (i.e., without intervention of another person)?
 - [x] main researcher

- [x] responsible ZAP
- [ ] all members of the research group
- [ ] all members of UGent
- [x] other (specify): Server administrator of the department

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* Have the results been reproduced independently?: [ ] YES / [x] NO

* If yes, by whom (add if multiple):
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  - affiliation:
  - e-mail:

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Study 4
% Data Storage Fact Sheet

% Name/identifier study Perspectives of social workers in reintegration support
% Author: Ine Lietaert
% Date:11/02/2016

1. Contact details
==========

1a. Main researcher

- name: Ine Lietaert
- address: FPPW, Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy
Henri Dunantlaan 2, B-9000 Ghent
- e-mail: Ine.Lietaert@Uggent.be or inelietaert@hotmail.com

1b. Responsible Staff Member (ZAP)

- name: Prof. Dr. Ilse Derluyn
- address: FPPW, Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy
Henri Dunantlaan 2, B-9000 Ghent
- e-mail: Ilse.Derluyn@Ugent.be

If a response is not received when using the above contact details, please send an email to data.pp@ugent.be or contact Data Management, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium.

2. Information about the datasets to which this sheet applies
==========
* Reference of the publication in which the datasets are reported:
Lietaert, I. (2016).Perspectives on return migration: A multi-sited, longitudinal study on the return processes of Armenian and Georgian migrants. (Doctoral dissertation)

Lietaert, I., Broekaert, E. and Derluyn, I. (accepted). Time Heals? A multi-sited, longitudinal case study on the lived experiences of returnees in Armenia. In Z., Vathi and R. King (Eds.), Return Migration and Psychosocial Wellbeing: Discourses, Policy-Making and Outcomes for Migrants and their Families. Routledge

Lietaert, I., Broekaert, E. and Derluyn, I. (in review). The boundaries of transnationalism: the case of assisted voluntary return migrants. Submitted to Global Networks.

* Which datasets in that publication does this sheet apply to?:

Semi-structured interviews with social workers, field note of observations of guidance

3. Information about the files that have been stored
==========

3a. Raw data
---

* Have the raw data been stored by the main researcher? [x] YES / [ ] NO
If NO, please justify:

* On which platform are the raw data stored?
 - [x] researcher PC
 - [x] research group file server
 - [ ] other (specify): ...

* Who has direct access to the raw data (i.e., without intervention of another person)?
 - [x] main researcher
 - [x] responsible ZAP
 - [ ] all members of the research group
 - [ ] all members of UGent
 - [x] other (specify): Server administrator of the department

3b. Other files
---

* Which other files have been stored?
 - [ ] file(s) describing the transition from raw data to reported results. Specify: ...
 - [x] file(s) containing processed data. Specify: Transcription of interview recordings
 - [x] file(s) containing analyses. Specify: Coding of data (NVivo), coding trees, fyles containing thematic grouping of data, files reporting results
 - [ ] files(s) containing information about informed consent
 - [ ] a file specifying legal and ethical provisions
 - [ ] file(s) that describe the content of the stored files and how this content should be interpreted. Specify: ...
 - [ ] other files. Specify: ...

* On which platform are these other files stored?
 - [x] individual PC
 - [x] research group file server
 - [ ] other: ...

* Who has direct access to these other files (i.e., without intervention of another person)?
 - [x] main researcher
 - [x] responsible ZAP
 - [ ] all members of the research group
 - [ ] all members of UGent
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4. Reproduction
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* Have the results been reproduced independently?: [ ] YES / [x] NO

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  - affiliation:
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Study 5
% Data Storage Fact Sheet

% Name/identifier study Perspectives of migrants in detention
% Author: Ine Lietaert
% Date:11/02/2016

1. Contact details
==========

1a. Main researcher

- name: Ine Lietaert
- address: FPPW, Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy
Henri Dunantlaan 2, B-9000 Ghent
- e-mail: Ine.Lietaert@Uggent.be or inelietaert@hotmail.com

1b. Responsible Staff Member (ZAP)

- name: Prof.Dr. Ilse Derluyn
- address: FPPW, Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy
Henri Dunantlaan 2, B-9000 Ghent
- e-mail: Ilse.Derluyn@Ugent.be

If a response is not received when using the above contact details, please send an email to data.pp@ugent.be or contact Data Management, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium.

2. Information about the datasets to which this sheet applies
==========
* Reference of the publication in which the datasets are reported:
Lietaert, I. (2016).Perspectives on return migration: A multi-sited, longitudinal study on the return processes of Armenian and Georgian migrants. (Doctoral dissertation)

Lietaert, I., Broekaert, E. & Derluyn, I. (2015). The Lived Experiences of Migrants in Detention. Population, Space and Place, (21)6, 568–579.

* Which datasets in that publication does this sheet apply to?:
Semi-structured interviews with migrants in Belgian detention centres

3. Information about the files that have been stored
==========

3a. Raw data
---

* Have the raw data been stored by the main researcher? [x] YES / [ ] NO
If NO, please justify:

* On which platform are the raw data stored?
 - [x] researcher PC
 - [x] research group file server
 - [ ] other (specify): ...
* Who has direct access to the raw data (i.e., without intervention of another person)?
 - [x] main researcher
 - [x] responsible ZAP
 - [ ] all members of the research group
 - [ ] all members of UGent
 - [x] other (specify): Server administrator of the department

3b. Other files
---

* Which other files have been stored?
 - [ ] file(s) describing the transition from raw data to reported results. Specify: ...
 - [x] file(s) containing processed data. Specify: Transcription of interview recordings
 - [x] file(s) containing analyses. Specify: Coding of data (NVivo), coding trees, fyles containing thematic grouping of data, files reporting results
 - [ ] files(s) containing information about informed consent
 - [ ] a file specifying legal and ethical provisions
 - [ ] file(s) that describe the content of the stored files and how this content should be interpreted. Specify: ...
 - [ ] other files. Specify: ...

* On which platform are these other files stored?
 - [x] individual PC
 - [x] research group file server
 - [ ] other: ...

* Who has direct access to these other files (i.e., without intervention of another person)?
 - [x] main researcher
 - [x] responsible ZAP

- [ ] all members of the research group
- [ ] all members of UGent
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4. Reproduction
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